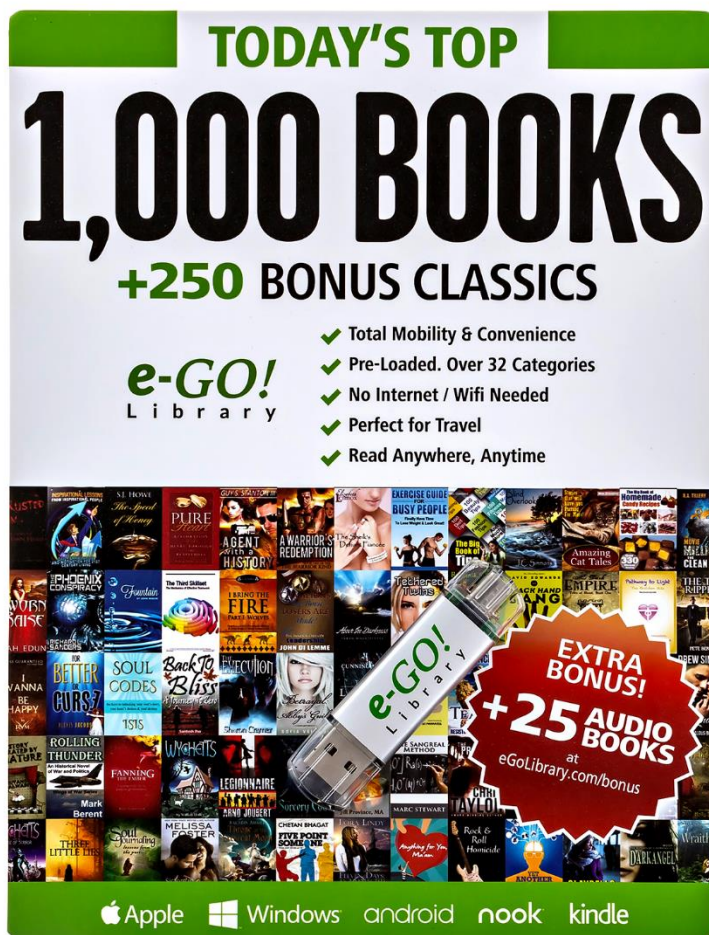


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**An Erotica/Urban Fantasy Novel
By**

Michel Poulin

AMERICAN SINNER

A mixed Erotica/Urban Fantasy novel

By Michel Poulin

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WARNING TO POTENTIAL READERS



THIS NOVEL IS MEANT STRICTLY FOR ADULT READERS. IT CONTAINS GRAPHIC DESCRIPTIONS OF SEX AND VIOLENCE, AS WELL AS COARSE LANGUAGE AND CONTROVERSIAL SUBJECTS THAT ARE UNSUITABLE FOR CHILDREN. WHILE THIS NOVEL DEPICTS MANY HISTORICAL PERSONS AND EVENTS FROM THE PAST, THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION AND WORDS OR DEEDS ATTRIBUTED IN IT TO PERSONS WHO EXISTED DO NOT REFLECT HISTORICAL REALITY. THIS NOVEL ALSO DOES NOT REFLECT IN ANY WAY THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE AUTHOR, WHO IS AN ATHEIST AND HUMANIST.

ABOUT THIS NOVEL

This novel is a sequel to the novel ETERNAL SINNER and was written more as an Urban Fantasy novel for adults than as a true Erotica story. While this book uses many concepts and terms borrowed from the Dungeons & Dragons Role Playing Game, the author did not follow rigidly the background rules, definitions and descriptions of the D & D game. This story thus cannot be described as being fully 'canon' as per the rules of D & D.

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CHAPTER 1 – A GOAL IN LIFE

07:36 (California Time)

Sunday, September 23, 1973

Peter Horowitz' apartment

Westwood District, Los Angeles

California, U.S.A.

“YES! YES! KEEP IT UP, PETER!”

“I'M...TRYING!”

Patricia quickly slipped one hand under herself and pinched the base of Peter's penis in order to prevent him from ejaculating too quickly and then becoming limp. With Patricia bumping up and down on top of him at a frenetic rate, her big, firm breasts flapping around, Peter thought that his heart was going to give up soon. Patricia, finally attaining orgasm half a minute later, then released her hold on his penis, allowing him to explode inside her with a loud groan of pleasure. With Patricia, still mounting him, lying down over him and with her perfect breasts in his hands, Peter Horowitz did his best to catch his breath and slow down his heartbeat.

“G...God, that was fantastic sex, Patricia! I hope that I was up to your expectations.”

Patricia Love, a fellow student at the University of California in Los Angeles, or UCLA in short, smiled at that and kissed him on the lips before replying.

“You were plenty good, my dear Peter. Let me just enjoy this position for another minute or two while you play with my tits. Maybe you will get another hard-on.”

“For a third time in a row? You want my death, Patricia?” Said Peter, still panting. “You are truly insatiable when it comes to sex.”

“Hey, it's in my nature!” Replied in a malicious tone Patricia, a statuesque nineteen years-old girl of stunning beauty with long black hair, large green eyes and a firm 38D chest. She finally got off Peter a minute later and left the bed, to go wash her groin in the small bathroom of his modest furnished apartment, situated within sight of the UCLA campus. On his part, Peter stayed in bed, up on one elbow and watching with a content smile the naked Patricia inside the bathroom.

"You must be the best thing that ever happened to me, Patricia. I wish that I could be with you for the rest of my life."

Patricia raised an amused eyebrow at those words.

"Is that a proposition or just a wish? You must know by now that I am not exactly the marrying type: I like too much to run around and have fun, like the bad girl I am."

"Oh, you are a bad girl alright, especially if one listens to the stories about you around the campus. You have built quite a reputation during your first year at the UCLA. You should be careful not to give an excuse to the Dean to discipline you or even expel you from the university."

Her smile faded somewhat then and she looked soberly at the fit and handsome 23 year-old Vietnam War veteran and mechanical engineering student.

"Don't worry about that, Peter: I have ways to prevent that from happening. Beside, I really want to complete my studies in photography and film and get my Bachelor of Arts degree."

"And what kind of job do you intend to try to get once you have your diploma, Patricia?"

"I don't know yet, to be frank. I haven't really thought about that. I would probably go work for a newspaper or a magazine at first, or I could open a private photography studio of my own inside my house."

"What about becoming a war photographer? That would be a challenging, exciting job, and I know that you love challenges."

"Me, a war photographer? You think so?"

"Why not? You are an energetic, athletic and strong girl, you speak a number of languages and you like action and adventure. It would also give you an opportunity to take pictures that would show to all the evil that men can do."

"...To show the evil that men can do..." Said dreamily Patricia, struck by those words. "I like that idea! Thanks, Peter: I will seriously think about that."

After washing off the sperm and vaginal fluid from her groin and inner legs, Patricia came back towards the bed, where Peter was still lazily lying, a wet face-cloth in one hand and a mischievous smile on her lips.

"Time to clean you up, boy."

Throwing the bed sheets away, she knelt on the bed and grabbed with one hand Peter's penis, which had grown back some stiffness in while he watched her in the bathroom.

Pulling back the foreskin, she then started rubbing the tip of his penis with her wet face-cloth in a slow, expert pattern. Peter stiffened and opened his mouth as more sensations radiated from his penis, while he developed a full erection. Seeing that, Patricia threw away her face-cloth and mounted him again, impaling herself on his big, throbbing penis. She grinned to him as she started grinding back and forth over him.

"Do you mind if I have a last serving before leaving?"

"Not at all, Patricia." Replied Peter, his hands going to her big tits to caress their large, puffy nipples. This time, it took all of his stamina to keep it up until she came with a long moan of contentment. Patricia then got up from him and took his hand to pull him up and out of the bed.

"I think that a face-cloth won't do now: let's take a good shower...together."

"O God!" Said Peter at that, his heart still beating furiously. She gave her a funny look in response while gently chiding him.

"Don't invoke Him, Peter: he is such a stiff ass about casual sex. No wonder that the Celestial Plane is such a boring place."

"Uh? What do you mean?"

"Forget it: just an attempt at a joke." Replied Patricia, kicking herself mentally for talking too much. She then pulled him towards the bathroom, where they both stepped inside the bathtub and pulled closed the curtain before turning on the water.

Forty minutes later, Patricia left Peter's apartment after a last kiss and went down to her car, a fiery red 1972 Pontiac Firebird Trans-Am parked in front of Peter's apartment block. Putting her overnight bag on the passenger's seat, she drove off and headed towards the nearby West Hollywood District, where she turned into the entrance of a walled mansion after a few minutes of driving. Stopping in front of the iron gate, she got out of her car and pushed the button of the intercom box fixed on the brick wall, next to the gate. A male voice answered her after twenty seconds.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"It's me, Patricia!"

"Hello Patricia! Come in!"

A buzz then told her that Harold McMasters was remotely unlocking the gate's lock. Pushing open the iron gate, she went back inside her car and made it roll inside the property, then got out again to close back the gate. Rolling for another hundred feet, she finally parked her sports car in front of the steps of the main entrance of a European-

style, two-storey brick mansion. A distinguished-looking gentleman in his forties was waiting for her at the door, wearing an embroidered robe over silk pajamas and a pair of leather and wool slippers. Patricia smiled on seeing the relaxed dress of her host.

"You are not dressed in your customary tweed suit this morning, Harry?"

"Can't a man take it easy from time to time?" Replied with good humor the master magician to his young visitor. "So, ready for your weekly teaching session on the magical arts?"

"I sure am! What are we going to look at today?"

"We will be working on your resistance to hostile spells. You..."

The magician then stopped speaking, while his eyes stared with disbelief at a gold ring covered with cabalistic symbols that she was wearing on her left middle finger.

"Holy shit! What do you have there? Its magical aura is shining brighter than any other magical item I have seen before in my life."

Patricia raised her left hand and put it forward, so that McMasters could detail it better, then spoke in a sober tone.

"Because it is probably the most powerful magical artifact one will find now in California, or around the World. It is a Greater Ring of Infernal Protection and I was given it as a gift by no other than the great Lucifer himself. He visited me at my house last Monday, along with my mother, Lilith."

"Lucifer visited you, with Lilith?" Could only say the stunned magician, making Patricia nod slowly once.

"He did! He came to tell me that I am now welcome again in Hell and that he made an edict forbidding other demons from trying to kill me. It seems that my uncovering of all these hypocrites I unmasked publicly during the last few months endeared me to him, especially in the case of those pedophile priests that I denounced. My mother, Lilith, is now one of his concubines and he brought her with him so that I could finally see her after all these decades I have spent in exile on Earth. Lucifer also invited me to return to Hell, saying that I have a very high magical potential that he could use there, but I politely declined: I grew to appreciate this life on the Material Plane and the many friends I have here in Los Angeles. I probably could enjoy a status of power in Hell, but you don't find true friends there...ever!"

"Wow! And may I ask what Lucifer looked like?"

"Like a dignified, impeccably dressed gentleman with polite manners. You probably would feel at ease with him, Harry, as long as he doesn't consider you a threat

or an obstacle. There are so many lies and misconceptions circulating about him, most of them originating from the Christian Church. Yes, he rules Hell with an iron fist, but he basically represents the essence of Human nature, with its emotions, its desires and its flaws. What the Humans call Heaven, the Celestial Plane, is actually a denial of that true Human essence, the refuge of those who blindly obey God and refuse to accept the Human nature as it is. You would probably find that place boring as Hell, if you will excuse the pun. Hell, or the Abyss if you prefer, is a lot more fun...if you are a punisher instead of a punished."

"What about Purgatory?"

"Purgatory? It doesn't exist, actually. Those souls who would be refused by those stiff-ass hypocrites in Heaven but are not dark enough to deserve punishment simply spend time in the higher, more lenient levels of the Abyss, until they can be sorted out. Contrary to God and his minions, Lucifer can make the difference between a fun-loving so-called sinner and a truly dark soul. Take me, for example. As a Succubus, a demon of seduction, I supposedly represent carnal sin itself, according to the Church. Yet, I simply enjoy sex and make others enjoy it as well, shedding aside all those hypocritical judgments about sex out of marriage. I have good friends like you, friends that are decent, honorable people, and I proved that I can care for others. Contrast that with those pedophile priests I unmasked, or with that obtuse, intolerant avenging angel that killed poor Jodie Brown recently, simply because she was afflicted with lycanthropy through no fault of her own. I got nearly killed while trying to protect her and would have died if not for the timely intervention of John Hideyoshi. Personally, I would consider John rather than that murderous angel as the true definition of 'good'."

McMasters was silent for a moment as he remembered the young black teenager, cursed as a wererat, killed just outside the 'Friends Corner Bar' by an angel on the trail of Patricia. He finally looked back at Patricia, his expression sober.

"Well, I am sure that he won't be the last being to try to kill you. You thus need more than ever to improve and advance your magical skills as much as possible. Come, my friend, let's go to my secret laboratory."

CHAPTER 2 – AN EMBARRASSING WITNESS

09:44 (California Time)

Tuesday, October 2, 1973

Offices of the Vice Squad, F.B.I.'s Los Angeles Division

Suite 1700, Wilshire Federal Building

corner of Wilshire and Sepulveda Boulevards

Los Angeles, U.S.A.

Roger Fairfax, head of the Vice Squad of the F.B.I.'s Los Angeles Division, didn't like at once the expression painted on the face of his boss, Division Director Robert Brown, when the latter walked in the large open office used by his squad. Brown was closely followed by a thin man whom Fairfax knew as being James McCord, one of the federal assistant prosecutors for the Los Angeles District. McCord had a leather briefcase in one hand as he walked with Brown towards Fairfax' desk, finally stopping in front of it. Brown then spoke, his tone grave.

"You better get your agents to assemble here to listen to me: we just got some bad news."

A look from Roger was enough to make his four agents move from their respective desks and roll their chairs in a semi-circle on each side of their squad leader. Once that was done, Roger looked up at Brown.

"What happened, Boss?"

"What happened is that the two wounded criminals we captured when we took down that snuff porn and kidnapping ring last June were just murdered, one in his hospital bed, the other in his cell. It happened that we were hoping for their live testimony in court to help nail the case against Donald Hurst, the multi-millionaire mogul we are accusing of being the true head of the ring."

Roger Fairfax, like his four agents, stiffened at that news: that criminal ring had been a particularly vicious and violent one who had cost the squad the life of one of its agents, Bernard Schiffer, along with the lives of two L.A.P.D. S.W.A.T. Team members.

"Someone was able to get at those two men, despite the protection put around them?"

"That's right! Everything points to those being professional jobs, probably done by experienced hired killers and possibly with inside help."

Roger swore under his breath on hearing that.

"Killers that Donald Hurst could easily afford to hire, in addition to his present battery of high-flight lawyers. It is not hard to figure out his interest in having those murders committed, but making these killings stick to him will be much harder."

"It is not only those two murders that will be difficult to pin on Hurst now." Said James McCord. "The whole case against him is now in jeopardy, thanks to the disappearance of those two potential witnesses. The documents we found in the lair of that kidnapping gang are now the only link between Hurst and the snuff porn and kidnapping racket you busted in June. Unfortunately, a good lawyer could argue about the legal value of those documents as proofs against Hurst, as they are by themselves only circumstantial evidence. We now have only one living person left that could help us prove that those documents were indeed inside the gang's lair when we raided it: Miss Jennifer Woods, the stripper whose tip provided us the crucial info needed to catch that gang."

Special Agent Janet Coleman, one of Roger's agents and the youngest and least experienced member of the squad, on top of being its only female member, looked with alarm at McCord.

"Then, that means that Jennifer Woods is also in danger of being murdered. We should put her under police protection at once."

Robert Brown gave her a disillusioned look in response.

"Don't forget that the two men just murdered were under police protection, Agent Coleman. Remember as well that we nearly lost Miss Woods in June, when someone inside the L.A.P.D. leaked to that criminal gang the fact that she had contacted us with information. You are however correct about the need for us to ensure her safety until Hurst's trial next month. The question is: will she accept our protection? Miss Woods has already proven to be quite a character."

"Well, she certainly can be stubborn when she wants to, on top of having plenty of guts, sir." Recognized Janet. "So, what do we do with her?"

"We approach her and, at a minimum, we will warn her of the danger she is now in. Maybe that will be enough by itself to make her ask herself to be put under our protection, something that would simplify things greatly."

"Then, I will put Janet and Nathan in charge of warning her and gaining her cooperation, sir." Said Roger Fairfax, making Brown nod his head.

"Do that, and quickly! We don't want some assassin to get to her first. Keep me apprised of what will be her answer about our offer of protection. This is now your top priority case. I really want that Hurst bastard to end his days in jail. On this, I wish you good luck, lady and gentlemen."

The five agents of the Vice Squad were silent as Brown and McCord left their office. Then, Roger Fairfax pointed an index at Janet Coleman and Nathan Chomsky.

"You two, find Jennifer Woods at once to warn her and offer her our protection. If you need backup, don't hesitate to ask. Now, get on it!"

"Yes sir!" Replied in unison Janet and Nathan before getting up and rolling their chairs back to their desks. Once at her desk, Janet quickly sifted through her address book, finding Jennifer Woods' address and telephone number within seconds.

"Here it is! Her apartment building is on Colton Street, just west of Chinatown. At this hour of the day, she is either sleeping after a night of strip dancing at the 'Pussycat Cabaret' strip club, or she is attending classes at the UCLA. Let me call her apartment first."

Forming the number she had for Jennifer Woods, Janet then waited impatiently as the telephone rang at the other end of the line.

"Come on, Jennifer! Pick it up!"

To her frustration, Jennifer's Code-a-Phone Model 700 tape answering machine took the call after four rings.

"Hello, this is Jennifer Woods' apartment. Unfortunately, I am not available at this time. Please leave a message after the signal and I will be happy to call you back later... BIIP!"

"Hello Jennifer! This is FBI Special Agent Janet Coleman: I need to speak to you urgently about your personal safety. If I don't meet you before you hear this, please call my office number at once."

Putting down her receiver, she then gave a concerned look at Nathan, who had listened on to her side of the call.

"She's not answering at her apartment. Either she is sleeping too soundly to hear her telephone or she is attending her classes at the UCLA."

"But, the UCLA campus is huge. How are we going to find her there?"

"She told me once that she was studying photography and film. That should narrow down our search quite a bit. Let's go down to the garage and get our squad car."

"Then I'll drive. I know Los Angeles much better than you." Replied Nathan. "If we don't find her at the university, we will then do a stop at her apartment, just in case. If that fails, we still can catch her in late afternoon, when she will go to the 'Pussycat Cabaret' to do her nightly gig."

"Sounds like a plan!"

Going down to the FBI garage in the basement, the two agents signed for an unmarked squad car and, with Nathan Chomsky at the wheel, drove out and onto Wilshire Boulevard. Thankfully, the Wilshire Federal Building was situated only a bit more than a mile away from the sprawling campus of the UCLA and the pair arrived at the university in less than ten minutes. Seeing a university police patrol car, Nathan waived at it and stopped side-by-side with it at a street corner, flashing his badge at the university cop.

"Special Agent Chomsky, FBI. We need to urgently find a student who is studying photography and film."

"Is that student in trouble with the law, mister?" Asked the cop, making Nathan shake his head.

"No! She is an important witness in a criminal case and we need to find her to ask her a few questions."

"Oh! In that case, you may possibly find her in the Broad Art Center Building, in the northeast corner of the campus, on Charles E. Young Drive North. If you will follow me, I will guide you to that building."

"Thank you! You are very helpful."

The university patrol car then made a U-turn and sped northward, followed by the FBI squad car. The two vehicles stopped after a mere minute later in front of the large building occupied by the Broad Art Center. Politely declining the offer of the university cop to accompany them, the two federal agents then entered the building. Once inside the entrance lobby, they went to a sort of duty office near the entrance where a female clerk greeted them with a professional smile.

"Good morning, lady and gentleman! May I help you?"

Both Nathan and Janet flashed their badges in response.

"We are FBI Special Agents Chomsky and Coleman. We need to find urgently a photography student named Jennifer Woods. Would you be able to direct us to her class?"

"Er, I am sorry but I don't have detailed lists of class attendances here. However, I can make a building-wide announcement if you wish so."

"That would be perfect, miss. Just say that Jennifer Woods is requested at the main entrance, but don't mention us."

"Oh my!" Said the female clerk in a worried tone. "Is she wanted for something?"

"No! She is just a witness in a criminal case, that's all."

"Alright, then."

Grabbing a microphone and switching it on, the clerk spoke in it in a deliberate tone, her voice resonating through the building via a number of loudspeakers.

"MISS JENNIFER WOODS IS URGENTLY REQUESTED AT THE MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE BUILDING. I SAY AGAIN: MISS JENNIFER WOODS IS URGENTLY REQUESTED AT THE MAIN ENTRANCE OF THE BUILDING. THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION."

The clerk switched off her microphone before making a forced smile at the agents.

"It may take a couple of minutes...if Miss Woods is indeed in the building. You may sit and wait in one of the sofas in that corner."

"Thank you, miss."

Going to a comfortable-looking sofa, the two agents sat in it and started watching the people passing through the lobby. Janet Coleman smiled as she looked around her.

"This reminds me of my years of law study in Harvard. A university campus is a good place to meet people and make friends."

"...and meet less than friendly people." Replied Nathan. "I met a bunch of white racists at the Kansas State University who were big on anti-Semitism. It eventually degenerated into a night encounter and fight in a dark corner of the campus."

"Oh? You didn't get beaten up then, I hope?"

Nathan smirked and briefly laughed at that.

"They were the ones who got beaten up. They had come as a group of five, hoping to overwhelm me in what was supposed to be a one-on-one fight, but I had brought my own backup team with me, made up of nine boys who hated racists and who

had brought baseball bats with them. Those wannabe goons ended up in hospital that night.”

“Good!” Said Janet, smiling at that story.

Patricia Love heard the public announcement about Jennifer Woods as she was about to finish a class in night photography techniques. That announcement made her frown at once: Jennifer Woods was one of her two alternate identities, along with that of Sylvia Thorne, and few people outside of her evening job as a stripper knew that name, with even fewer people knowing that Jennifer Woods claimed to be a photography student at the UCLA. This had to be something serious. She however waited another three minutes, time for her class to be completed, before walking out of the classroom. Instead of going right away to the entrance lobby, Patricia went into the nearest female washroom and locked herself up in one of the toilet stalls. Waiting until nobody else was in the washroom, she then concentrated while activating her shape shifting power. Her whole body started glowing faintly as she changed from a tall and beautiful teenager with long black hair and large green eyes to an equally tall and beautiful young woman with red hair and green eyes. Leaving the toilet stall, she checked herself briefly in a mirror to make sure that she had morphed into the proper shape and face, then walked out of the washroom. A minute later, she was going down the main staircase of the building and stepped in the entrance lobby. The sight of the two FBI agents waiting for her convinced her at once that there probably was trouble ahead. Keeping a calm appearance, she walked briskly to the two agents, who got up from their sofa to greet her.

“Special Agents Coleman and Chomsky! To what do I owe your visit here?”

“To a potential threat against you.” Answered Janet Coleman. “A deadly threat. We need to speak with you in private, inside our car.”

“Uh, okay, but I want to stay here, on the campus: I have another class to attend in ten minutes.”

“As you wish! Follow me!”

The trio then walked out to the FBI squad car and sat in it before Janet spoke to Jennifer/Patricia from the front passenger seat.

“Jennifer, we got some bad news this morning. The two wounded gunmen we captured during that June raid on the snuff porn and kidnapping ring's lair were murdered while in custody. Our bet is that Donald Hurst, the mogul implicated in that

affair, paid professional killers to get rid of those two incriminating witnesses before his trial in November. This unfortunately leaves you as the sole witness who could validate the credibility of the documents we found in that gang's den."

Jennifer/Patricia sobered up at once, as she understood too well the implications of Janet's words. She had been the one who had told the rushing policemen where to find the documents left by the dead ringleader. If that Donald Hurst had taken the trouble and risk of tasking professional killers to get rid of two men held in police custody, then that bastard would certainly not hesitate to have a simple stripper killed. However, while she understood the anxiety of the FBI agents about her safety, she had many attributes and powers that made her extremely hard to kill, or even to hurt her in the least.

"Look, I appreciate your worries about me and I thank you for warning me about this, but I can take care of myself, truly. If you were planning to put me under police protection, then I must refuse."

"But, Jennifer, you may have a professional assassin hounding you." Insisted Janet. "Alone by yourself, you may not live long against such a killer. Even if you could somehow evade that killer, Hurst will then most probably hire another killer or two to get rid of you."

"Then, why not get rid of that problem at the root and kill that Hurst bastard? You and I know that he is guilty as sin, right? Why waste all that time and money in a trial?"

Jennifer's reply shocked Janet into silence for a moment before she could regain her composure.

"Jennifer, you know perfectly well that we can't do that. It would be illegal."

"Illegal, maybe, but it would be true justice rendered. Your justice system seems to have been made to profit the criminals, instead of the honest citizens."

Troubled by her words, Janet nonetheless tried again to change Jennifer's mind.

"Are you sure that you don't want our protection, Jennifer?"

"Very sure, Janet! Don't worry about me: I will be still living and available to testify in November. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to return into class. Thank you for the warning."

Jennifer then opened her door and stepped out of the car, walking back inside the arts building at a brisk step, watched by the two FBI agents.

"Damn! What do we do now?" Said Janet. Nathan answered her after a few seconds.

“The only option left to us now: we provide her a discreet round-the-clock protection detail, whether she likes it or not.”

17:50 (California Time)

Rented car, parked on 26th Street, near the ‘Pussycat Cabaret’

Santa Monica, Los Angeles

The beefy man waiting behind the steering wheel of his rental car, parked near the entrance of the ‘Pussycat Cabaret’ strip club, had a mean smile when he saw a stunningly beautiful young redhead approach the strip club on foot from the direction of the nearby Wilshire Boulevard. Comparing her face to that on a photo he kept on the front passenger’s seat, he took out from under his vest a snub-nosed .38 Special revolver and quickly screwed a silencer on its muzzle while keeping his eyes on his intended target. To his surprise, the young woman suddenly seemed to hesitate and slowed down her pace while staring at his car. Before the hired killer could figure out what could have attracted the girl’s attention, he saw her move her lips as if she was speaking to herself silently, while at the same time doing some strange motion with her right hand. The assassin didn’t have time to wonder further, as he suddenly saw a dark, black veil come down in front of his eyes. Putting down his revolver on the passenger seat, he instinctively passed his hands on his face, trying to take off what he felt was some kind of blindfold or hood. To his utter confusion, he found nothing over his face, while he could not even see his own hands, despite being able to feel them on his cheeks and forehead: he was blind! His confusion turning quickly into panic, the assassin blinked his eyes a number of times and shook his head violently, but still couldn’t see anything but utter darkness.

“No! This can’t be happening to me!”

Now both frantic and desperate, the man opened his car door and stepped out of his vehicle: maybe something in his car had poisoned him. However, the fresh air didn’t do him any apparent good. Completely overwhelmed by this and giving way to uncontrolled panic, he took a few steps while shouting out loud.

“NO! NOOO!”

The furious blast of a powerful horn suddenly made him pivot on the spot...just before a heavy delivery truck slammed into him at thirty miles per hour. The man was projected like a broken puppet on the pavement in front of the truck. The truck’s driver desperately

stepped on his brake pedal but could not avoid rolling over the man's head and upper torso before coming to a stop in the middle of the street.

Sitting in their unmarked squad car parked near the entrance to the strip club, Janet Coleman and Nathan Chomsky also saw Jennifer Woods approach on foot, carrying in her left hand the small suitcase she customarily used to bring the clothing she used for her strip shows. Both agents saw her hesitate and slow down while staring at a sedan car parked a mere two spots in front of the FBI car, something that made them concentrate their attention on that vehicle. Nathan suddenly saw something that made him shout a warning to Janet.

"I SEE A GUN!"

"Shit! Let's go!"

Both federal agents were exiting their car in a hurry while reaching for their revolvers when they saw the man in the suspect car also come out. The man's behavior however surprised them: instead of walking towards Jennifer Woods, he started shouting in a desperate tone while taking a few steps in the middle of the street.

"NO! NOOO!"

Before the agents could react further, a big delivery truck speeding down the street blew its horn just before slamming into the man and then crushing him under its wheels. Shocked by that scene, Janet Coleman could not move for a few seconds, then ran towards the inert body splattered on the pavement. She quickly had to conclude that the man was dead, his skull crushed like a melon. She still took the time to check for a pulse as the hysterical truck driver came at a run and stood beside her, looking down with horror at the dead man.

"O MY GOD! WHY DID HE WALK LIKE THIS IN FRONT OF MY TRUCK? WAS HE CRAZY?"

Janet gave him a sober look and tried to calm him down.

"Whatever was the reason for him to behave like that, this accident was not your fault, mister: you could not possibly have avoided him. I saw everything and will say so to the local police when they show up. The best you can do now is to go sit in your truck and wait for a patrolman. I will be here, ready to back up your testimony, so you shouldn't get in any trouble over this."

"Jesus! I have driven a truck for twelve years now and I never hit anyone before. That poor schmuck is dead, right?"

"Very dead indeed! Now, go sit in your cab and smoke a cigarette to calm down, mister."

"Uh, alright, miss."

As the truck driver returned into his vehicle, Janet straightened up on her feet and looked for Jennifer Woods. She tensed up when she didn't see her anywhere and was about to walk to the entrance of the strip club, intent on checking on the stripper, when Nathan came to her, a silenced revolver and a photo of Jennifer in his hands.

"Look what I found in that man's car. This guy was actually a hired killer targeting our witness. I don't know what happened to him to act the way he did, but it certainly happened at the best possible time for us...and for Jennifer Woods."

Janet looked with bitterness at the revolver and photo, then at the dead man on the pavement.

"So, our fears about Jennifer being targeted as a witness by this Donald Hurst bastard were justified after all. Could you stay here and call a police patrol car? I am going to go inside the club to make sure that Jennifer is okay."

"Understood!"

Walking quickly to the entrance of the strip club, which was not open yet to the public, Janet knocked on the door, making a big, muscular man open it and look down at her with a neutral expression.

"Yes? What can I do for you, miss?"

In response, Janet took out her badge and showed it to the doorman.

"FBI Special Agent Janet Coleman. I need to speak with one of your strippers who just walked in, Jennifer Woods. Don't worry about her being arrested: I just want to ask her a few questions."

"Very well, miss: follow me!"

Locking back the door behind Janet, the doorman then led her through a luxurious lobby, then down a long hallway, where a number of doors were near the end. The doorman knocked on one of the doors, which sported a big paper star with 'Mélanie d'Amour', the stage name of Jennifer Woods, written on it.

"Miss Woods, a federal agent is here to see you."

"Let her in!" Replied the muffled voice of the stripper. The doorman then opened the door and waved Janet in, then closed the door behind her, himself staying outside. Janet found herself in a small, typical artist dressing room. Jennifer Woods

was sitting at a dressing table with a big mirror. She also happened to be completely naked. While Janet was a true heterosexual woman with no bisexual tendencies, the view of Jennifer's perfect body and large, firm breasts still troubled her. Jennifer then got up to face her, revealing the fact that her groin was closely shaved.

"I suppose that you want to ask me questions about that crazy man who walked in front of a truck, Janet."

"Uh, yes! Have you seen that man before?"

"Never!" Answered truthfully Jennifer/Patricia. "I hesitated for a moment outside because I thought for a moment that I saw a gun in his hands. Then he walked out of his car and started screaming loudly just before he stepped in front of that truck. Since there was apparently nothing left that I could do for him, I went into the club to prepare for my first act. Should I have stayed outside?"

Janet thought over that for a moment before shaking her head.

"No! You did well to go inside the club: another assassin could have been lying in ambush as a backup to that dead man. By the way, we found a silenced revolver and a color picture of you in his car: that man was thus definitely a professional killer hired to get rid of you, probably on the orders of Donald Hurst."

Jennifer frowned at those words and threw a frustrated look at the FBI agent.

"And this would not be enough to finally throw that piece of shit in jail until his trial? He is obviously as guilty as Hell!"

"I'm sorry, Jennifer, but the law doesn't work that way."

"You mean that the law doesn't work much of the time, especially when rich and powerful bastards like Hurst are involved."

Janet was tempted for a second to agree verbally with the stripper on that but checked her tongue in time.

"That is not for us to decide such things, Jennifer. Now, are you sure after this incident that you still don't want our protection until Hurst's trial?"

"Very sure, Janet. However, if this could reassure you, I will temporarily live away from my apartment and go hide at the place of a good friend of mine."

"That is actually a good idea, Jennifer." Said Janet while starting to take out her notepad and pen. "What is the name and address of that friend of yours?"

Jennifer shook her head slowly in response.

"I'm sorry, but I won't tell you...or anyone else. Past events have shown me that you have one or more bad apples in your department or in the L.A.P.D.. I won't take the risk of having my friend's place compromised by a crooked cop."

While her answer disappointed her a bit, Janet had to mentally agree that Jennifer was right about the danger of a corrupt cop leaking her friend's address to Donald Hurst: despite a thorough investigation, the source of the leak that had compromised Jennifer to the snuff porn and kidnapping gang had not been found yet. Jennifer then walked slowly to Janet, a malicious smile on her lips, stopping in front of her and with her puffy nipples touching Janet's chest.

"But enough about all this sinister hired killer's business. Why don't we forget about it for the moment and have some time together, Janet?"

Jennifer/Patricia then activated her seductive powers to the full as her voice became mellow and her hands started caressing gently the agent's cheeks.

"You are a beautiful young woman, Janet, and you need some good time to change your mind from your work."

Janet, who would have normally stepped back from her, suddenly found it impossible to resist her charms. Blood rushed to her brain and she trembled with desire as Jennifer started gently undressing her, licking her now erect nipples as soon as her bra was off. Janet then slowly raised her hands and started caressing and fondling the stripper's fabulous breasts as Jennifer slipped one hand down the front of her panties and started to expertly rub Janet's clitoris. Both women were soon exchanging French kisses while mutually rubbing their clitoris and fondling their breasts. Jennifer gently pushed Janet's naked back against one wall of her lodge, where she held her until Janet climaxed explosively after a few minutes of rubbing, fondling and licking. With waves of pleasure dissipating gradually, Janet looked down with embarrassment at Jennifer, who had been kneeling in front of her to give her cunnilingus.

"I...I can't believe that I let myself do this with you. If my boss would hear about this, he would fire me on the spot for homosexuality."

"Don't worry about that, Janet." Replied Jennifer with a devilish smile. "Nobody will hear about this from me. You will however be more than welcome to have more of this with me whenever you wish so...in a discreet manner of course."

"Uh, right! Let me get dressed up before my partner shows up here."

That took her a few minutes, after which she looked at Jennifer with concern.

"Please do go hide at your friend's place as soon as possible, Jennifer. I would hate to see anything happen to you."

"I will, Janet, I promise. Be careful yourself."

Janet nodded once, then walked out of the dressing room to go find her partner. She had to stop for a long moment in the hallway, her back to a wall, in order to go over her emotional confusion. She had always been a heterosexual woman and had never felt bisexual desires before, nor had she ever been attracted sexually to a woman. So, what had happened to her in that lodge? Despite some serious mental introspection, Janet was unable to find an answer to that. Both embarrassed and somewhat shameful, she resumed her walk out of the cabaret. Janet found Nathan Chomsky speaking with a L.A.P.D. police officer while standing over the body of the dead gunman, still sprawled on the street pavement. Another policeman was directing the traffic around the body, while two morgue technicians were just parking their van near the scene of the accident. Going to Chomsky, she let him finish describing what had happened to the policeman before asking him a question.

"What did you find on that dead gunman?"

"Very little indeed, at least in terms of identity papers. Apart from over 800 dollars in cash, he only had a driver's license in his pockets, plus some spare bullets for his revolver. He had no credit cards or other papers on him, except for this little piece of paper with what looks like a telephone number written on it."

Taking the small piece of paper offered by Nathan, Janet looked at the number on it and slowly nodded her head.

"It is a local Los Angeles number. It will be interesting to find out whose number it is. Did Martin and George see anything suspect around Jennifer Woods' apartment building?"

"Nope! In fact, they didn't see her enter or exit her apartment at all this afternoon."

"Hum... Maybe she came to the club directly from some other place. By the way, Jennifer again refused our protection but told me that she was going to take refuge at a friend's house until the trial is over. She refused to give me the address of that friend, though."

"I'm not too surprised by that: that girl is quite strong-headed. Well, let's see what we will find about this assassin once back at the office: I would not be surprised to

see that this driver's permit is actually a fake one. We will definitely need to check his fingerprints: if he is a real pro, then he is liable to have some criminal record about him."

"Uh, do you have any idea about what could have happened to him to make him panic and scream like he did, Nathan?"

"No! I never saw anything like this before. The important thing is that Miss Woods is safe...for the moment. I will call George by radio and tell him to relieve us here, while we go back to the headquarters to investigate this dead man."

Twenty minutes later, with the morgue's van gone with the assassin's body, their two partners arrived in their own unmarked car, allowing Janet and Nathan to leave for their headquarters. The two agents' first move once there was to go brief their direct supervisor, Roger Fairfax, about the incident in front of the 'Pussycat Cabaret'. Then, Nathan went to the morgue to collect the fingerprints of the dead assassin, while Janet looked up the telephone number found in the dead man's pocket. What she found about it attracted a disgusted smirk on her lips. By the time that Nathan was back into their squad's office, she had plenty to tell her partner.

"You will never guess whose telephone number that hit man had in his pocket, Nathan."

"Not Hurst's number? That would be too nice to believe."

"Not Hurst's telephone number, but one belonging to someone who has links with that rich bastard: one of his lawyers, James Parker Junior. Unfortunately, that Parker could always claim that our dead man was simply his client or was planning to ask for his services for some reason, so this is only circumstantial evidence at best."

"Maybe, but it certainly reinforces my opinion that Donald Hurst wants Jennifer Woods dead, and that before he goes to trial. We will certainly have to go question that lawyer about our dead assassin, but I doubt that he will give us anything but flowery bullshit."

"Maybe we shouldn't go question that James Parker, Nathan. That would alert Hurst that we are on his trail concerning Jennifer Woods. Maybe we should simply tap his phone and see if he incriminates himself or Hurst by talking about our assassin." Nathan thought those words over for a few seconds before nodding his head.

"That makes sense, Janet. The big question will be if a judge will accept to authorize a telephone tap on such a high-level lawyer on such flimsy evidence."

"Well, we won't know until we try, no?"

"True! I will go ask our boss to arrange that tap. In the meantime, could you run these set of fingerprints I took from the body of our would be assassin?"

"Sure!"

Analyzing the fingerprints from the dead man, then searching the FBI criminals databank for a match took Janet a good hour, as that job was still being done manually, with no computer available in 1973 to do that search. She however did find a match for them. Not surprisingly, the name she got was not the same as the one on the driver's permit found on the dead man. She was looking at the two page document she had just received by fax from the central FBI archives in Washington when a dejected Nathan sat back at his desk, which faced Janet's desk.

"No luck with that tap warrant, Janet: the judge we contacted refused outright to permit a tap, saying that the link to that lawyer was too flimsy. So, did you find a match to those fingerprints?"

"I sure did! Our dead man's real name is Frank Buono, a suspected professional killer who has been investigated in the past for a number of murders but who was never convicted. He was rumored to work for the Gambino crime family and had a reputation for being a ruthless and efficient killer. Unfortunately, he always had top lawyers to help him out when needed. Also, the one witness that could have helped convict him in a past case conveniently disappeared before a solid case could be built against Buono."

"Why am I not surprised?" Said sarcastically Nathan. "Unfortunately, this leaves us with precious little to work with. The only thing we can do now is to continue to protect Jennifer Woods as discreetly and as best we can, while hoping that there won't be any other attempts against her life."

"You are right, but protecting Jennifer won't be easy: we don't know where she is planning to hide until the trial, remember?"

"Damn, you're right! We will have to follow her tonight, when she will leave the strip club after her work, and find out where she goes. She may not like that if she discovers that we are following her around, but it is for her own good."

23:49 (California Time)

FBI unmarked car, parked near the 'Pussycat Cabaret'

"There she is! Be ready to follow her on foot, Martin."

"Got it!" Replied Martin Prendergast, a thin man with an unremarkable appearance who could blend in about any crowd. Waiting for Jennifer Woods to walk past their car on the opposite side of the street, Martin then stepped out of the FBI car and raised the collar of his trench coat while lowering the front of his hat. His face now in the shadow made from his hat, Martin crossed the street under the lights of the street lamps and neon advertizing signs of the clubs and restaurants lining the street, then started following the young redhead from a fair distance. As per her known routine, she walked up to the corner of 26th Street and Wilshire Boulevard, turning at the corner with Wilshire. Martin knew that there was a bus stop one block down on the boulevard and assumed that she would take a bus to wherever she would go sleep tonight. Accelerating a bit his pace, he got to the street corner and gave a look from behind the corner of the building situated on the side of Wilshire Boulevard she had turned on. He was just in time to see Jennifer Woods disappear into a narrow, dark alley between two buildings. Intrigued by that, Martin hurried to that alley's entrance, arriving there mere seconds after Jennifer. Glancing quickly inside the obscure alley, he saw nobody at first. A second, longer look then confirmed to him that Jennifer Woods was nowhere to be seen, despite the fact that there were no doors or windows through which she could have disappeared. Now mystified, Martin slowly entered the dark alley, his hand on the grip of his service revolver and with his senses on full alert. He walked down the whole length of the alley, carefully checking behind the few garbage bins and cans he passed by, only to come out empty. Confused and frustrated, he finally walked out of the alley and went to speak to George Adams through the open door window of their car, now parked near the alley.

"She turned inside that alley and disappeared somehow while in it. I just can't figure out how she did that."

George, who knew that Martin was no beginner at trailing suspects, pondered that for a moment.

"Damn! How are we supposed to protect her if we can't even find out where she goes? The boss won't be happy about this."

"Well, if he thinks that he can have better luck than us, he is welcome to try. Let's turn around the block a couple of times, just in case she simply hid somewhere close by."

"Right! Get in!"

Despite crisscrossing the streets of the neighborhood for a good ten minutes, the two agents soon had to give up: Jennifer Woods was truly gone. Frustrated and professionally humiliated, they had no choice left then but to return to their headquarters.

Inside the basement of her home in Westwood, to which she had teleported from inside the alley, Jennifer Woods/Delicia smiled to herself. With all the magical powers and spells she possessed, no normal human being would ever be able to trail her if she wished for her destination to be a secret. Her smile faded however when she thought about the danger threatening her. Even though one assassin had failed to kill her and got killed instead, she doubted that this Donald Hurst would now leave her alone because of that failure. In fact, he was most probably going to hire another killer or more to get rid of her, and this as soon as he learned about the death of the first assassin. Not being the kind to take a threat lying down, Delicia started thinking about how to return the favor to that rich bastard in a way that would not incriminate herself. It didn't take long before an idea came to her mind, making her smile devilishly to herself. However, that idea would better be executed during the incoming weekend, when she would have more free time to execute her plan. As for tonight, she now needed to rest a bit. Going up to her bedroom, she undressed and went to sleep on her big king-sized bed. She actually needed much less sleep than a Human, along with little food and drinks, but still needed some hours of rest in order to be in full shape for her next day of studies at the UCLA, followed by a few hours of work at the 'Pussycat Cabaret' and possibly some sex here and there.

19:14 (California Time)

Wednesday, October 3, 1973

Luxury mansion, West Sunset Boulevard

Bel Air, Los Angeles

"A call for you, sir. It is Mister Parker."

Taking the receiver of the telephone brought to him by his butler on the patio of his outside pool, the obese, half-bald man in his fifties spoke in it as the butler put down the telephone on the small table at the side of his long chair.

"What do you have for me, Jimmy?"

"Some bad news, I'm afraid, Mister Hurst. The independent help I hired had an accident and failed to fulfill his contract. In fact, he is dead, killed by a truck last evening."

"WHAT? HE WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A PRO!"

"He was, sir, but it seems that luck was not on his side that day. The object of the contract is still intact as a result of this accident. What would you like me to do now, Mister Hurst?"

The multi-millionaire mogul, angered by this piece of news, didn't need to think much before answering Parker in a vehement tone.

"You find another contractor to do the job, and quickly! Hire more than one contractor if that could help. I am doubling the price for that contract. I want that problem gone by next weekend. Do you understand me?"

"Uh, perfectly well, sir. I will take care of the arrangements right away, sir."

"Good! Keep me posted!" Said Hurst before slamming down the telephone receiver. Taking a deep breath to calm down, Hurst then got up from his long chair and signaled to the very young teenage girl swimming naked in his pool to follow him before he walked back inside his luxurious mansion. The young tart wanted badly to become a Hollywood celebrity and was ready to do about anything for that. Well, he needed to change his mind now, while she needed to be reminded who could make her or break her.

16:38 (California Time)

Thursday, October 4, 1973

FBI unmarked car, parked near the 'Pussycat Cabaret'

26th Street, Santa Monica, Los Angeles

"I really wish that Jennifer would have given us the address of her friend, or better even, had accepted our protection. This business of having to wait for her every day to show up for work at the strip club is killing my nerves."

Nathan Chomsky, sitting behind the steering wheel of their unmarked car parked near the 'Pussycat Cabaret', smiled to Janet, who was sitting in the front passenger seat.

"Welcome to surveillance duty, Janet. It is certainly boring work but it is still important work. At least, Jennifer did indeed vacate her apartment on Colton Street, if we can go by the reports from George and Martin, something that makes her a more

difficult target for any assassin trying to find her. In turn, that assassin has little choice but to stalk the strip club, as we are doing now, in order to get to her. That did work in our favor on Tuesday, remember?"

"True! Still, I can't help..."

Janet then paused, while her eyes went to something across the street. Nathan looked in the same direction as her and saw a man carrying a long tube resembling those used by artists to carry large, rolled paintings or drawings. That man, who was in his late thirties and was dressed informally, walked to a narrow alley between two buildings facing the strip club, then turned inside the alley, disappearing from sight. Nathan became suspicious at once: that tube was big enough to contain a rifle.

"I saw that man carrying a tube. I'm going to check him out, Janet. Stay here and wait for Jennifer."

Despite the internal urge to also go out of their car, Janet realized that Nathan was right, thus stayed inside while her partner stepped out on the street. Her heart beating faster now, she followed Nathan with her eyes as he crossed the street and walked to the entrance of the alley, glancing quickly past its corner before entering it. Janet suddenly felt blood rush to her brain when she saw a man hurriedly stepping out of a car parked some fifty yards away as soon as Nathan walked into the alley. That man, who had been behind the wheel of the car, wore a long trench coat and a wide-brimmed hat and put his right hand inside a pocket of his coat as he walked briskly towards the alley's entrance. Now afraid for her partner, Janet didn't take the time to think further and got out of her car, checking first for incoming traffic before crossing the street. A passing truck cut her field of view for a moment, long enough for the second suspect to disappear from sight. Accelerating her pace to a near run, Janet discreetly took out her service revolver as she arrived at the corner of the alley's entrance. One cautious glance showed her the second suspect approaching the foot of an external emergency fire staircase, some twenty yards away. Nathan was halfway up that staircase, obviously heading for the flat roof of the building, while the first suspect was out of sight and probably already on the roof. Then, she saw the second suspect take out a revolver from his trench coat right pocket before taking out as well a silencer that he started screwing to the muzzle of his gun. Her heart now beating furiously, Janet left the protection of the brick corner she was leaning against and started walking towards the second suspect while pointing her gun, gripping it with both hands.

"FBI! DROP YOUR WEAPON, NOW!"

The gunman jerked his head towards her, freezing for a short second, then pivoted quickly to face her while raising his revolver. Doing her best to follow the counsels she had received from her FBI firearms instructors during her training, Janet squeezed progressively the trigger of her revolver while keeping her sights aligned on the gunman facing her. Her shot went off a fraction of a second before the gunman's revolver, a powerful model, erupted, its detonation partly muffled by its silencer. Janet's bullet connected, hitting the gunman in the chest and making him jerk, while the man's bullet whistled by her left ear. However, while grimacing with pain, the gunman didn't go down and kept his revolver pointed at her, his index squeezing the trigger for another shot. Janet fired again, hitting him in the chest for a second time. Still, the man would not come down and fired his second shot, thankfully going wild. Mentally swearing at the puny power of her snub-nosed .38 Special revolver, Janet fired in quick succession three more shots, emptying her Smith & Wesson Model 36 revolver. The gunman still had his weapon pointed at Janet when he finally crumpled to the ground like a broken puppet. Janet was letting out a big sigh of relief when two gun shots rang out from above. Looking up at the emergency staircase, she was just in time to see the first suspect fall off the roof, with Nathan having his revolver pointed upward. That suspect splattered on the pavement of the alley with a dull 'thud', with his body then staying motionless.

"JANET, ARE YOU OKAY?"

"YES! AND YOU?"

"I'M ALRIGHT! CHECK THAT MAN WHILE I GO ON THE ROOF TO SEE WHAT HE WAS CARRYING."

"GOT IT!"

Hurriedly reloading her revolver first, Janet then cautiously approached the two bodies lying in front of her and checked them for a pulse. Both men proved to be dead. Going to the man she had shot dead, she examined his gun while being careful not to touch it: this was after all a certified crime scene. That gun turned out to be a Colt Python six-shot, .357 Magnum revolver with a four inch barrel, a top quality weapon.

"Well, that guy sure was paying himself the best in terms of revolvers."

A growing commotion and shouts coming from the street then made her pivot around. She swore to herself when she saw a crowd forming around a person lying down on the sidewalk on the other side of the street: an innocent bystander had apparently been hit by one of the stray bullets from the gunman she had killed. She was tempted to immediately run to go help that person, but remembered that she had two bodies and

weapons lying at her feet that she could not leave unattended. Looking up, she shouted at the top of her lungs.

"NATHAN, COME DOWN QUICKLY! A BYSTANDER HAS BEEN HIT AND NEEDS HELP."

"I'M COMING IN A SECOND!"

As soon as Nathan reappeared on the edge of the roof, the tube belonging to the first suspect in his hands, Janet sprinted towards the downed bystander, running through the traffic and barely avoiding being hit by a car whose driver was staring at the body on the sidewalk. She had to push people out of the way to get at the downed bystander.

"MAKE WAY! MAKE WAY, PLEASE! FBI!"

Once beside the victim, Janet saw that it was a small, old man in his sixties who lay motionless on the sidewalk, an expanding red stain at the level of his right lung and pink foam coming from the corner of his mouth.

"Damn! He has a perforated lung. SOMEONE CALL AN AMBULANCE, QUICK!"

Nobody moved at first. Then, a young, well-dressed man finally reacted and ran to the nearest public telephone booth. Janet was then able to concentrate on administering first aid to the unfortunate old man, covering the hole in his chest with a folded handkerchief and pressing on it. A quick check told her that the bullet had not exited through the back and was still inside. The young man who had gone to make a call then came back to her.

"An ambulance is on its way, miss. I also called for a police car."

"Good thinking, mister! If you are ready to help further, I would like you to hold that handkerchief in place while applying a light pressure."

"I can do that!" Said a female voice, making Janet's head snap up to find Jennifer Woods standing in the front rank of the crowd of spectators.

"Alright! Kneel on that side, then take hold of the handkerchief... Yes, that way."

Now free to get up, Janet did so and asked the bystanders to disperse and leave fresh air for the victim. Next, she looked back at the alley in which the shooting had occurred and saw that Nathan was still there, searching the bodies of the two gunmen. Two minutes later, two patrol cars from the L.A.P.D. screeched to a halt in front of the strip club, preceding by a minute an ambulance. Flashing her FBI badge at the incoming policemen, Janet quickly briefed them on what happened, then asked them to secure both the alley and the portion of sidewalk on which the old man lay. She was finally able

to speak discreetly with Jennifer Woods after the old man had been put on a gurney and was being carried into the ambulance.

"Jennifer, I believe that you really need to accept our protection. We just confronted and killed two gunmen who were apparently bent on ambushing you the moment you arrived at the club."

The young stripper, her expression somber, glanced at the alley, where two bodies lay on the pavement under the guard of Nathan Chomsky and of two policemen, then looked back at Janet.

"Then I will find a more discreet way to get inside the 'Pussycat Cabaret'. As long as you will not have found who in the police is leaking information about me, I will keep my alternate address secret. On the other hand, this should be enough to arrest that bastard of Donald Hurst, as a preventive measure, no?"

"I'm sorry, Jennifer, but it doesn't work that way, unfortunately. Unless we find evidence on these dead gunmen linking them clearly to Donald Hurst, then we can't do a thing against him."

"Then, let's go see those bodies!" Replied Jennifer, who half turned around before Janet could stop her.

"Whoa, Jennifer! You can't do that: you are not a police officer, just a private citizen. Let us do our job."

Jennifer shot a clearly frustrated look at Janet at those words.

"Very well, then! I will thus go do MY job as a stripper. I will call you if anything happens."

"Please do that, Jennifer."

Janet sighed with frustration as the stripper left and walked to the main entrance of the 'Pussycat Cabaret', entering the club after knocking on the door. Crossing the street and going into the alley, Janet joined Nathan near the bodies of the two gunmen.

"So, what did you find out about them, Nathan?"

"That both had handguns with silencers, while the one on the roof had a precision bolt action rifle in .22 caliber with scope and silencer hidden in that fiberglass tube he was carrying. Fortunately for us, both carried more identity papers on them than our late Frank Buono. With luck, we will be able to trace them to Hurst. The only thing left to do is to go search their car."

"I noticed which one they were in: I will take care of searching it."

"Then, here are the car keys I found on the man you shot. By the way, nice shooting you did there: all five bullets were in his chest."

"Yeah, except that those .38 Special bullets took their sweet time to make that man fall down. Maybe I should get something with more punch as a handgun."

"Well, you should know that FBI regulations don't allow you to use the gun of your choice as your daily carry weapon. On the other hand, you're right about the lack of punch of our snub-nosed revolvers. That man you shot certainly had a nice, powerful weapon. One hit from it and you would have probably gone down at once."

"I was lucky, but a poor old man wasn't. Jennifer was right: we should find some motive to arrest at once that Hurst bastard before more innocents get hurt. Unfortunately, that's easier said than done. I'll go check that car now."

Leaving Nathan with the bodies, Janet walked out of the alley and went to the Ford sedan from which she had seen the second gunman exit. She actually didn't need to use the keys found by Nathan, as she found the car unlocked. Looking first in the glove compartment, she found a set of car registration which told her that the vehicle was a rental, plus two spare magazines for a Colt 1911 pistol and a box of .357 Magnum cartridges. Then searching the inside of the car, she saw a large paper envelope lying on the carpet, in the space between the driver's seat and the front passenger's seat. Her curiosity suddenly intensified, Janet grabbed the envelope and emptied its content on the passenger's seat. Cold sweat broke out on her forehead when she saw pictures taken by an instant camera that showed the apartment block in which Jennifer resided on Colton Street, with the address scribbled on the margin of a photo. Only police officers and Justice Department secretaries were supposed to know that address! Bile now in her throat, she continued her search, finding a Kodak instant camera and boxes of films under the front passenger's seat. Going last to the trunk, she opened it, only to freeze at the sight of what was inside it. A half-opened canvas bag was nearly filled with bundles of dynamite sticks, grenades, detonators, trip wires, fuses and other materiel to prepare bombs and booby traps. There was also a sawed-off shotgun, a 9mm submachine gun, ammunition, ropes, rags, a meat cleaver, a bone saw and four one gallon jugs marked as containing nitric acid. Suddenly feeling nearly sick, Janet closed back the trunk and locked it, then locked the doors of the car, to prevent anyone from taking things from it. Her face was somber when she walked back inside the alley to talk with Nathan.

"Those bastards had photos of Jennifer's apartment building, along with its address. They also had everything needed to build bombs and booby traps and to dismember her body and then dissolve it with acid."

Nathan tightened his jaws on hearing that and gave a murderous look at the two dead men sprawled on the pavement near him.

"Fucking bastards! Somebody at either the FBI or LAPD is still leaking information about Jennifer to that Hurst bastard. However, I find hard to accept that one of our own people would be working for Hurst. Stay here for a moment: I am going to call the office on this and pass that info to the boss."

Nathan was gone for maybe ten minutes by the time he came back into the alley to speak with Janet.

"The boss is on his way to here and I can tell you that he is not a happy customer. A crime scene team and a coroner's van are also on the way. We are to hold positions until they arrive."

"Then, I will go wait near the car of these men, to make sure that nobody tampers with it."

"A good idea!"

"Uh, what will happen with Jennifer now, Nathan? This only shows that she is at extreme risk until she can testify at Hurst's trial."

"I know, but we technically can't force her to accept our protection, while we have no legal argument to justify putting her in protective custody. It is really up to her to decide what she does from now on."

Not satisfied one bit with that answer but seeing that Nathan was correct, Janet repressed her anger and frustration and walked back to the gunmen's car, to discreetly wait near it in the entrance of a small boutique.

She had been watching the car for maybe fifteen minutes when a marked F.B.I. van, a coroner's van and an unmarked car arrived and parked at the entrance to the alley. To Janet's surprise, Roger Fairfax came out of the unmarked car accompanied by Robert Brown, the head of the F.B.I.'s Los Angeles Division. She waited for a pair of crime scene technicians to come to her, then gave them the keys to the suspects' car and briefed them quickly before walking briskly to the nearby alley. There, she found

Nathan discussing with Fairfax and Brown, using a rather intense tone with his superiors.

"...We can't continue to let this Donald Hurst free to launch assassins at Miss Woods, sir! At this rate, she won't survive until the trial."

"I get what you say, Agent Chomsky," said patiently Brown, "but legally we can't do a thing against him right now, not until some evidence implicates him directly with these attempted assassinations."

"So, we are supposed to just wait until our sole surviving witness gets killed, sir? We should at the least put Hearst and his crooked lawyer of his under telephone surveillance, so we could have a chance to connect them to these hired guns."

Brown sighed in frustration before replying to Nathan.

"I just tried that myself, but Judge Grant again refused my request for phone taps. Sometimes, I wonder if he's in Hurst's pocket."

"Let's not forget the fact that, as well, someone is still leaking information about Miss Woods, sir. We should cut all links with the L.A.P.D. in this affair, for Miss Woods' sake."

"In view of what happened today, I think that I will do just that, Agent Chomsky." Brown then noticed Janet, who had approached from behind him.

"Ah, Agent Coleman! I am happy to see that you came out of this intact."

"Not as much as me, sir. To get back to Miss Woods, we really should make her accept to go in protective custody. There is no way for us to know if some new assassin would somehow learn in the days to come where she is hiding. A killer could even go stalk her inside the campus of the U.C.L.A., in which case many innocents bystanders could get hurt."

"And where is Miss Woods right now, by the way?"

"She went inside the 'Pussycat Cabaret' shortly after the gun battle and is probably preparing for her first act of the evening."

"Then, come with me, Agent Coleman: we are going to pay her a visit. Agents Fairfax and Chomsky will handle the crime scene investigation in the meantime."

"Yes sir!"

Walking with Deputy Director Brown to the entrance of the strip club, Janet knocked on its large wooden door, then showed her F.B.I. badge to the doorman when the latter opened the door.

"Agent Coleman, F.B.I.! We are here to speak with Miss Jennifer Woods."

The doorman, remembering her from her previous visit, nodded his head and opened the door wide.

"Please come in, miss, mister. Miss Woods is presently speaking with the club manager in his office. I will lead you to them."

"Thank you!"

Passing in front of a cloakroom and crossing a posh entrance lobby, the doorman led them to the door of an office with a brass plate bearing the inscription 'Frank DeSoto, Manager'. A male voice answered when he knocked on the door.

"COME IN!"

The doorman then opened the door and stuck his head in.

"Two F.B.I. agents came in to see Miss Woods, Mister DeSoto."

"Very well: let them in!"

Walking in with Brown, Janet saw Jennifer Woods, dressed rather incongruously in a policeman's uniform, sitting on the corner of a large work desk behind which a handsome man in his late thirties was sitting. The man then got up and walked around his desk to come shake hands with Janet Coleman and Robert Brown.

"I am Frank DeSoto, manager of the 'Pussycat Cabaret'. I was in fact discussing with Jennifer the shooting that has just occurred in front of the club."

"Deputy Director Robert Brown, in charge of the Los Angeles Division of the F.B.I.. Me and Agent Coleman came to speak to Miss Woods about that shooting, as she was the intended target of two professional gunmen that my agents intercepted and killed. Could we speak with her in private for a moment?"

"Uh, sure! However, be advised that Miss Woods is due on scene in about twenty minutes."

"This shouldn't be long, Mister DeSoto." Promised Brown. Nodding his head, the manager then walked out of his office, closing the door behind him. Now alone with Janet and Jennifer, Brown looked her up and down, a faint smile on his lips.

"Are you planning on joining the L.A.P.D., Miss Woods?"

"No, just to strip bare its image, Director Brown." Replied Jennifer in jest, making the F.B.I. agents grin with amusement.

"I see! Now, if we could get serious again, I would like to offer you again the protection of my agency, miss."

"Ain't going to happen, mister!" Replied at once Jennifer. "I already told that before to Agent Coleman."

"Do you fully realize the kind of mortal danger you are in, miss? This is the second time in three days that assassins came for you here. Know that we found pictures of your apartment block, as well as explosives and detonators, inside the car of the two killers we intercepted today."

Jennifer's face hardened at the mention of the pictures taken of her apartment building.

"Maybe I should return the favors and hire a killer to get rid of that Hurst bastard, since you are incapable of restraining him, mister. Look, I have both a job and university studies to manage and I won't be able to continue with either if I am held in some hidden hole until next month, that is if Hurst' lawyer doesn't find a way to delay repeatedly that trial with fancy legal arguments. I am sorry, but I will manage by myself, thank you. That is my final word!"

Brown stared at her in silence for a moment, his expression somber.

"For your sake, I hope that your decision will not end in tragedy, Miss Woods. However, I have no legal way to force you to come under our protection, short of arresting you on some pretext."

"HA!" Replied Jennifer, defiant. "And what would be the charges then? Indecent exposure? My strip acts are within the law and, before you would arrest me, you would need to arrest or caution as well a few others who come regularly to watch my performances, including a couple of your own agents."

"WHAT?" Nearly shouted Brown, stiffening at once. "How could you say that?"

"How? By having chatted with them in this club, the same way I chat with other customers, including lawyers, attorneys, judges and police officers who regularly frequent this club. You shouldn't be surprised to learn that many who publicly condemn stripping as immoral actually enjoy watching it...without their wives knowing it."

Jennifer made a devilish grin as Brown stared at her with indignation.

"By the way, you won't get the names of those people from me: that would hurt badly Frank's business and I certainly wouldn't want to do that. If you have nothing else to tell me, then you will excuse me: I have to prepare for my show."

Brushing past Brown, Jennifer then walked out of the office, leaving the shocked F.B.I. senior man alone with Janet Coleman.

"Damn! This girl is certainly a hard-headed one. I hope that she will be truly careful during the next few weeks. Well, no point in staying here longer: we have enough to do already about those two dead gunmen."

Leading the way, Brown then left the office, followed closely by Janet, and walked out of the club, to return to the scene of the gunfight in the alley.

Despite the façade of assurance she had kept in front of the F.B.I. agents, Jennifer was now seriously worried. Not about getting killed, as she would be extremely hard to kill with simple human weapons, but about the very real prospect of innocents around her getting hurt accidentally, like in the case of the old man hit by a stray bullet this afternoon. That worry in turn made her pause as she analyzed for a moment why she felt that way. Typical demons would not have had a single thought or preoccupation about those innocents, but that was one thing that distinguished her from the other demons: she was able to care for others. Half of her blood came from a Celestial, a fallen archangel who, while having disobeyed his Lord and having been expelled from the Celestial Plane as a result, had still been a fundamentally good being. That half-Celestial bloodline had made her a monstrosity in the eyes of the other occupants of the Abyss, who had then tried to kill her, forcing her mother Lilith to hide and abandon her in the Material Plane. Then, a simple woman named Marie Laurent had found her, a young demon girl crying alone in a dark alley of Paris in 1932, and had sheltered her despite her obvious supernatural appearance. Marie Laurent had then cared for her, treating her as her own daughter and raising her while teaching her about her values, which included love and kindness to others. Because of all that, Delicia was no longer simply a demon Succubus using a human form: she was now in terms of attitudes and feelings more akin to an immortal Human possessing extraordinary powers and magical abilities. Delicia then shook herself up and returned her mind to her present situation: it was definitely time for her to go on the offensive, instead of passively waiting for more assassins to show up. But first, she needed a small piece of information, so she accosted Frank DeSoto, who had been waiting in the reception lobby and greeting the first customers of the evening to his cabaret. Signaling him to join her near his office, she spoke to him in a low voice once alone with him.

"Frank, I need your help about something."

The manager looked gravely at her: while their relationship had stayed strictly professional during the year they had been working together, he was extremely fond of Jennifer and this business of assassins hounding her deeply worried him.

"You can ask anything you need of me, Jennifer."

"Thank you, Frank: you are truly a good man. Look, I know that, despite your family links with the Mafia, you are not a gangster. However, you do have plenty of contacts and ways to get information. What I need is simple: the home address of that bastard Donald Hurst, the Hollywood mogul whom I am due to testify against and who is probably the one sending hired killers my way."

DeSoto took only a second before he nodded in agreement, answering her in a near whisper.

"That should be easy enough for me to find, Jennifer. Go prepare for your show. I will have that information ready by the time your finish at midnight."

"Thanks, Frank! You are a real friend." Said Jennifer before kissing him on the lips. She then left for her dressing room, situated with other dressing rooms behind the stage of the cabaret.

When she finished her last act of the night just before midnight and returned to her lodge, it was to find Frank waiting for her there. The manager took the time to admire her still mostly naked body before handing her a folded piece of paper.

"You will find on this paper both the home address of Donald Hurst and the address of his work office, plus his personal telephone number. The bastard lives in Bel Air, in a mansion on West Sunset Boulevard. That mansion has armed guards, so be careful if you approach it. I also got the name and address of his right-hand man, a crooked lawyer named James Parker Junior. May I ask in return what you intend to do with that info?"

Jennifer smiled gently to him in response.

"I will simply return to that bastard the same favor he did to me. Don't worry: I won't put myself at risk. Thank you for the info, Frank."

"You're welcome, Jennifer. Have a good night!"

"You too, Frank."

The cabaret manager then left her lodge. Unfolding the paper he had given to her, Jennifer read the few words and numbers on them and smiled.

"If you won't come to Hell, then Hell will come to you, Donald Hurst."

Taking the time to change in her street clothes and packing in her suitcase her stage clothes that needed to be cleaned, Jennifer/Delicia then teleported directly to her house in Westwood. For the time being and until things cooled down, it was better for her to avoid her rented apartment on Colton Street, especially since she now knew that its address was known by Hurst and his henchmen. Once inside her house, she immediately shape-shifted to her form as Patricia Love and retrieved her car keys before going inside her garage, where her fiery red 1972 Pontiac Firebird Trans-Am was parked. Getting in the driver's seat, she activated the garage door remote control, then started the powerful V-8 engine and rolled out of her garage, remotely closing the garage door behind her. Driving to Bel Air and Hurst's mansion took only a few minutes, her house being less than two miles from the mogul's residence. Slowing down a bit but not enough to attract attention, Delicia visually detailed the mansion and its walled grounds, memorizing at the same time the precise location of a small clump of trees near the residence. With that done, she drove back to her house, putting her car inside the garage and going to her bedroom to change. This time, she put on a relaxed outfit of dark blue jeans, black sweater and black running shoes before teleporting to the clump of trees near Hurst's mansion.

While the mansion was mostly dark, with lights showing in only one room at ground level, a number of lights illuminated strategic points of the property, including the main gate, with its iron grill and guardhouse. Being able to see in the dark with her supernatural senses and vision, Patricia/Delicia quickly spotted a total of three private security guards: one at the main gate, one at the front entrance and another doing rounds around the mansion. She also saw what appeared to be a swiveling security surveillance camera mounted on top of a pole near the main gate. There was also a high brick wall enclosing the property. For any normal intruder, this would represent a fairly risky target, but she was no normal intruder. Uttering quietly a few magical words, she turned into an invisible, intangible ghost and started floating towards the nearby perimeter wall of the property. She went through the wall as if it did not exist and continued towards the mansion, going through its southern façade and finding herself inside a large kitchen. The kitchen was lit and a man in the uniform of a private security guard was present in it, munching on a sandwich. The man however didn't see Patricia, nor could he possibly be able to. Ignoring the man, Patricia floated out of the kitchen

and into a large, luxuriously decorated hallway lined with expensive paintings and works of art. A large, marble staircase went up from a large reception lobby intersecting the hallway. Still invisible and silent, Patricia went up the stairs and arrived on the first floor, in which she expected to find the bedroom and private office of Donald Hurst. The first, darkened room she visited turned out to be an empty bedroom, probably reserved for guests and visitors. The next room proved to be a vast office, complete with a huge rare wood work desk and a set of easy chairs and sofas. The one thing that attracted Patricia's attention there was the big steel safe tucked in a corner of the room, behind the work desk. Going to it and examining it quickly, she saw that it was a top quality model with combination lock and with an internal volume of at least twelve cubic feet. Knowing the kind of illegal activities Hurst was involved in, he probably had a big flow of cash money and valuables that he kept in that safe and, possibly, incriminating papers or photos concerning rivals and partners alike. It would definitely be nice for her to get access to the inside of that safe, for two reasons: first, being an immortal being forced to move on and start a new identity every few decades or so, cash money and valuables like gold and diamonds would always be useful to her when the time came to disappear and change venues. Second, anyone finding this safe empty after tonight would think that Hurst had left in a panic to go hide overseas from the American justice system. Patricia had a mean smile at that thought: Hurst was going to disappear alright, but not to some luxury retreat in the Caribbean.

Continuing her search through the first floor of the mansion, Patricia finally found Donald Hurst, sleeping in the huge bed of a posh bedroom. A very young teenage girl was also sleeping in that bed, apparently naked. Quietly approaching the bed in the dark room, she was soon standing beside the sleeping girl and muttered a 'Sleep' spell, deepening the girl's sleep to a near coma. Next, she moved to Hurst's side of the bed and telepathically entered the mind of the mogul to plant a suggestion in it.

"The girl was really nice with you tonight. She deserves a nice bonus. You need to go now to your safe and open it to get some money for her."

"I...I need to get some money from my safe..." said Hurst in a near whisper before getting slowly up and out of his bed like a sleepwalker. In what was close to a state of hypnosis, Hurst walked out of his bedroom and went to his private office, where he lit the main ceiling lamp. Patricia stood close behind him, looking over his shoulder as the mogul turned the knob of his safe's mechanism and memorizing the combination.

To her pleased delight, the safe proved to be nearly full with piles of banknotes, small boxes, gold bars and various papers and documents. As Hurst hesitated, his foggy mind unsure what to do next, Patricia slipped another suggestion inside his brain.

"I will leave the safe open for the moment, until I can decide how much to give to the girl in the morning."

"I will decide later... Better leave this open for the moment..." said Hurst slowly before straightening up while leaving the door of the safe open. Before he could do two steps, Patricia rematerialized behind him and, using a heavy ashtray that had been lying on the work desk, administered a forceful blow to the back of his head, knocking him unconscious. Her next move was to lay on top of his inert body and concentrate, teleporting with the mogul to the basement of her Westwood house. There, she solidly tied Hurst up and gagged him before leaving him alone in the basement and teleporting back to Hurst's office. Going quickly through the content of the big safe, she found over 200,000 dollars in cash, plus a good ten kilos in gold bars and coins and two small boxes filled with cut diamonds. There were also close to half a million dollars in U.S. Treasury bearer bonds in the safe, along with a few ledgers and large envelopes. Returning quietly to the main bedroom and searching it, Patricia quickly found a pair of leather suitcases in a walk-in wardrobe closet and brought them to the private office, where she stuffed the valuables and papers from the safe in them. Being careful to leave the safe half open, as if Hurst had emptied it in a hurry, Patricia grabbed the two suitcases, then teleported to her house with them.

When Donald Hurst woke up, it was with pain radiating from the back of his head. He didn't understand at first that he wasn't in his darkened bedroom until he belatedly realized that he was both tied and gagged. Panic then set in and he groaned through his gag while contorting on the concrete floor he lay on. A minute later, the ceiling light of the room he was in lit up, temporarily blinding him. When he was finally able to see clearly, he felt his hair stand up on his head: the young woman he had tried to have murdered was now looking down at him with a cold expression!

"So, you are finally awake, you bastard! It is now time for you to pay for all your crimes."

Going to a rope that was tied around Hurst's feet, Jennifer Woods pulled on the other end of it, which went around a large steel hook screwed to one of the thick structural wood beams supporting the floor above. With his back and head roughly pulled across

the concrete floor at first, Hurst soon found himself suspended upside down like a side of beef in a butcher's shop. That analogy made him shake with fear as Jennifer tied up the end of the rope to another hook, then crouched in front of him to speak to him in a suave tone of voice.

"So, comfortable now? By the way, I want to know if you ever used hard drugs, like heroin or cocaine."

Not understanding why she was asking that at such a time, Hurst shook his head vehemently, making Jennifer smile with satisfaction.

"Good! In case you wonder why I asked that, know that some friends of mine could use your blood. However, I wouldn't want to give them blood tainted with drugs." Hurst, his eyes bulging from the terror that now gripped him and wiggling his suspended body like a harpooned tuna, could only watch as Jennifer went to get both a large, stainless steel bucket and a knife from a work bench, then returned beside him, placing the bucket directly under him. She knelt beside him and grinned to him while showing him her knife, a long, sharp blade.

"I will now bleed you like the pig you are, Hurst. See you in Hell!"

Grabbing his hair with one hand and pulling his head sideways, Jennifer next stabbed the mogul in his jugular, making a thick flow of blood pour out of it. She hurried to position the bucket directly in the path of the jet of blood, so that as little of the precious liquid would be lost. By the time that Hurst had lost most of his blood and was about to pass out, Jennifer ripped off the tape covering his mouth and approached her own mouth, sucking the mogul's soul out and killing him. Instead of eating that soul, like a normal Succubus would do to gain strength and power, she let it float up while shouting a message through the Planes.

"COME GET THIS SOUL, OH GREAT LUCIFER, AS IT IS MOST WORTHY OF HELL!"

A fraction of a second later, a sort of miniature vortex appeared in midair and sucked Hurst's soul inside it. The vortex then disappeared, leaving Jennifer/Delicia alone with the now dead body of the mogul. Putting temporarily away the bucket full of blood and the bloodied knife, Jennifer stepped away and concentrated before shouting one word in Abyssal, the tongue spoken in Hell.

"DISINTEGRATE!"

A thin green ray then shot out of her extended right index and struck Hurst's body. The cadaver vanished into a burst of green light and a sinister sizzle, leaving only a small pile

of ashes on the concrete floor and a partially burned up rope. Jennifer's normally green eyes glowed a fiery red as she stared with satisfaction at the pile of ashes.

"One hypocrite less in this world now. James Parker Junior, you are next!"

00:41 (California Time)

Saturday, October 6, 1973

'Friends Corner Bar', Little Tokyo District

Los Angeles

The long and narrow hall of the 'Friends Corner Bar', situated in a small alley of the Little Tokyo District of Los Angeles, was nearly half full when Patricia Love entered, something to be expected on a weekend. The tall and thin pale man with East European features standing behind the bar smiled on seeing her enter. His eyes then shifted to the large cardboard box she was carrying in her hands.

"Hello, Patricia! Nice to see you again! What do you have there?"

"A little gift for you and your comrades, Roman." Answered Patricia before putting the box down on the bar's counter. Roman Radu looked on with curiosity as she took out one by one eleven glass bottles with wine etiquettes still pasted on them. The bottles were filled with a deep red liquid and closed with cork plugs.

"It is Real Sangria, Roman. You better mark those bottle properly before putting them in your refrigerator."

Roman gave her a sharp look at the mention of 'Real Sangria', the name used when mentioning human blood in the 'Friends Corner Bar'.

"This must have come from a minimum of two persons, Patricia. Would you care to tell me how you got that? John Hideyoshi could ask questions about it."

Patricia nodded her head, understanding the concern of the barman: she was no Red Cross volunteer and getting human blood normally entailed some unsavory details. As for John Hideyoshi, the owner and manager of the bar, he certainly had the right to know about the origin of all that blood if it was to be drunk by his vampire customers.

"You certainly can ask, my dear Roman. Basically, I took care of two pieces of shit who richly deserved to go to Hell, but I took care of collecting their blood before sending them on their way to eternal damnation. If you are going to spill blood for a good cause, you might as well save it and put it to good use, no?"

The 565 year-old vampire grinned in amusement at her explanation and shook an index in front of her face.

"You are learning fast...for a youngster, Patricia. Are you planning to go talk with John about this?"

"That was my intention, Roman. In the meantime, can I offer a free round of Real Sangria before you store this away?"

"Sure! Be my guest!"

Turning around to look at the customers present in the bar, all of whom were regular patrons with a secret or two to hide, she rose her voice to make her announcement.

"I just brought a fresh arrival of Real Sangria, for those who are interested."

Two of the customers, one man and one woman, came to the bar at once on hearing that, looking with glee at the bottles. The woman was of middle age, small and pale and was obviously of modest means if one judged from her worn clothes. Patricia knew that Cyndie Strutters worked as a night janitor and was thus quite poor. The man was even more shoddily dressed and looked a lot like the homeless man he was. That had not stopped Patricia/Delicia from liking him as she got to know him during the past year, along with the other special customers of the bar: Brian Winslow had been bitten over 200 years ago and had become a vampire at age 23, but had gone to great lengths to avoid biting and infecting others during those decades. He had also turned to the life of a homeless man in order to stay away from normal Humans and avoid the temptation of sucking their blood. He was actually the best example of the kind of supernatural/magical beings John Hideyoshi was striving to help and support among Human society, by providing his bar as a refuge and meeting place. Roman took out three wine glasses and put them on the counter, then opened one of the bottles brought by Patricia and filled the three glasses before looking at Patricia.

"Would you like something for you, so that you can toast with us, Patricia?"

"Hmm, I won't say no to a little scotch on the rocks, Roman."

"One scotch on the rocks, coming up!"

Quickly pouring a glass of scotch for Patricia, Roman then grabbed one of the glasses full of blood and raised it high, imitated by the others.

"To the health of Patricia, a good friend!"

"Cheers!" Responded in unison Patricia, Strutters and Winslow before taking good sips from their glasses.

With the two vampire customers returning to their table with their glasses of 'Real Sangria', Patricia went to a door giving access to the back rooms of the bar and opened it, then followed a corridor before climbing up a wooden staircase. Once on the upper floor, she went to knock on a door made of lacquered wood, getting a muffled response.

"Come in, Patricia!"

Smiling at that demonstration by John Hideyoshi of his telepathic powers, Patricia pushed the door opened and entered a large room mostly devoid of furniture but whose walls were lined with a fine collection of Asian works of art, antique weapons and pieces of armor, most of them of Japanese make. As for John Hideyoshi, he was visible through an opened door at one extremity of the room, sitting behind a work desk covered with papers and files.

"Aaah, my dear Patricia! You're just in time to distract me from this dreadful bookkeeping work. Please, come in and sit down!"

Patricia walked at once to John's office and sat in a comfortable padded chair near his work desk.

"So, what brings you to my bar tonight, Patricia?"

Patricia took a moment to answer the powerful being behind the desk, thinking her words over first.

"John, I had to kill two men in the last two days, because they were trying to have me killed in order to eliminate me as a witness in a criminal case against them. Since I am a pragmatic girl, I saved their blood before disintegrating them, so that I could give it to your vampire patrons and employee. At least they served one good purpose that way before dying."

John Hideyoshi, in appearance a small Japanese-American man in his thirties, stared at her in silence for a moment. John's powers and magical abilities were nearly as great as those of Delicia and he would probably have been able to read her mind like a book, but that was not his style. John Hideyoshi was a being who respected the others around him and constantly showed kindness and generosity, on top of great tolerance.

"Well, if you acted in self-defense, then I can't find fault with you. As for saving these men's blood for my customers, it was actually a logical and useful idea. May I ask what kind of accusations those men were facing?"

"One was accused of directing a sex slavery and kidnapping network, while the other took care of arranging the dirty work for his boss."

John nodded once in understanding. A being over a thousand years old, he had seen too much of Humanity's history to be moved by the deaths of men who had exploited and hurt others.

"It certainly doesn't sound like many will miss those two men, Patricia."

"They certainly won't be, John. I came tonight so that you wouldn't think that I am hiding things from you, especially when I indirectly connected your bar with their deaths."

"I thank you for your frankness, Patricia. If you have to kill again men or women who richly deserve death, then I won't mind if you bring more fresh blood for my bar. My blood collection bank is legal, but its output is quite limited and this bar is not the only magical protected refuge I support."

Patricia raised an eyebrow at those last words.

"You never told me that you run other magical shelters, John."

"Let's say that I am always discreet about that subject: too much is at stake to take chances that someone could inadvertently leak information about those shelters. You can imagine the kind of mayhem that would ensue if normal Humans would learn that there are such things as vampires, werewolves, demons and angels roaming this Earth every day."

Patricia rolled her eyes at that.

"We then would definitely live in interesting times, as the Chinese curse says."

"Right! Know that I was planning to visit Japan, where one of my shelters is situated, in December, during the holidays. How about if you accompanied me on that trip? We could make it a vacation together."

A happy grin came at once to Patricia's face.

"Hell, that's a great idea! Count me in!"

"Then we have a deal. Be ready to travel on the fifteenth of December. Can you be free for at least two weeks in that period?"

"No problem, John! Thank you for inviting me on: I will owe you a big one."

"My pleasure, Patricia. Now, if you don't mind, I better finish this book accounting tonight."

"Oh, no plans for helping yourself to those tonight, John?" Replied Patricia while pulling up her sweater and making her big, firm breasts pop out. John smiled but shook his head.

"Thank you but not tonight: I really have to finish this. However, expect to be drilled and pounded to death during our vacation in Japan."

Patricia clapped her hands together while making a funny face in response.

"Drilled and pounded to death... What more can a Succubus hope for! Be prepared to have this brain of yours fucked out in Japan."

"Then we have a challenge! Now, out, you young perverted girl, before I roast you with my dragon breath."

Giggling, Patricia got up from her chair, wiggling her exposed breasts in front of John's eyes before leaving his office.

10:46 (California Time)

Monday, October 8, 1973

Office of the Division Director

F.B.I. Los Angeles field office

"Yes, what do you have for me, Roger?"

"News about that Donald Hurst bastard, sir: he apparently fled into hiding on Friday. His main lawyer, James Parker Junior, also apparently went into hiding at about the same time."

"WHAT?" Nearly shouted Robert Brown, rising from his chair behind his desk. "Tell me more!"

"Well, sir, our first hint about that was when we tried to see Hurst on Saturday, to question him in relation with the shootout near the 'Pussycat Cabaret' on Thursday. We were then told that Hurst had left. When questioned further, his domestic staff said that he apparently disappeared during the night between Thursday and Friday, after emptying his safe. We actually saw that safe, nearly empty except for some unimportant documents, and with its door open ajar. His staff swore to us that nobody saw him leave, but I wouldn't bet my shirt on their sincerity. We then visited Parker's home and downtown office, only to find him gone as well, with his own safe opened and empty. Furthermore, a locked filing cabinet in Parker's downtown office, in which he supposedly kept some of his most sensitive files, was found opened and empty. Again, nobody saw Parker leave, either at his home or at his downtown office. My opinion is that they were starting to get nervous after those two botched murder attempts against Miss Woods

and panicked, grabbing what they could of their fortune and fleeing Los Angeles, probably to go hide in another country.”

Brown took a moment to digest that information, then looked back at the head of his vice squad.

“I believe that Hurst was free on a bond while awaiting his trial, right?”

“Correct, sir! If he really left the country, then that legally makes him a fugitive.”

Brown slapped his hand loudly at once on top of his desk.

“Have a warrant published for Donald Hurst! Also, alert Interpol about him as being a fugitive suspect in a case of kidnapping, sex trafficking and complicity in the murder of a federal agent. Publish as well a warrant for that Parker, for suspected complicity in the attempted murder of Miss Woods. I want all F.B.I. field offices and customs exit points in the country to look for those two men.”

“I’ll take care of this right away, sir.” Said Roger Fairfax before turning around and leaving Brown’s office. As he walked back to his own office, he mentally hoped that this would mean that the poor Jennifer Woods would now be able to live without further fear of being murdered.

CHAPTER 3 – A TRIP TO JAPAN

08:18 (California Time)

Saturday, December 15, 1973

Pan Am departure lounge, Satellite Building 2

Los Angeles International Airport

California, U.S.A.

“MAY I HAVE YOUR ATTENTION, PLEASE! THE FIRST CLASS PASSENGERS FOR FLIGHT PAN AM 845 TO SAN FRANCISCO AND TOKYO ARE NOW WELCOME TO BOARD THEIR PLANE.”

“Aaah, here we go!” Said John Hideyoshi while getting up from his chair in the Pan Am departure lounge. “I am really anxious to see Japan again. And you, Patricia? Did you ever go to Japan before?”

“Never! By the way, I can speak Japanese thanks to my special abilities, but I cannot read or write Japanese.”

“Then, you better pretend that you don’t speak Japanese.” Replied John in a low, cautious voice. “Being illiterate would appear bizarre in a foreigner who can speak Japanese fluently.”

“Okay then! I will play the dumb girlfriend for you.”

John gave her a serious look then as he replied in a near whisper.

“Patricia, you are anything but dumb. In fact, you actually have the intelligence level of a Human genius. There is no need to sell yourself short.”

“Well, from what I read about Japan, I will be considered by Japanese men to have two strikes against me there: first, I am a woman; second, I am a Gaijin¹. You must know yourself about Japanese social attitudes, John: you lived in Japan long enough for that.”

“Hmm! I must say that you are right about many Japanese being xenophobic.”

“Then, I should warn you that I won’t take insults lying down, John. You should know that, while demons are mostly evil, they are also very proud beings, and I am no

¹ Gaijin : Derogatory term used by Japanese to describe foreigners.

exception. But be reassured: I won't disintegrate on the spot every Japanese man who will lack respect towards me."

John rolled his eyes at those words.

"That should reassure me."

The disparate couple joined the short lineup of first class passengers forming at the gate to their plane, where a Pan Am employee checked their boarding passes before letting them walk down the passageway. Two pretty and young Pan Am stewardesses greeted them just inside the access door of their plane, a Boeing 747-121 jumbo jet.

"Welcome aboard Pan Am 845, lady and gentleman." Said one of the stewardesses with a big smile. "May I see your boarding passes, please... Thank you! You have the seats 3A and 3B, in the nose compartment, to your left. Champagne will be served soon after we take off."

"You can't fault Pan Am's service to its passengers." Said John while entering the first class cabin. "Even their regular class is quite nice."

"But we might get the best anyway, when we have the money for it." Replied Patricia, smiling. They soon sat down in their 'sleeperette seats', wide, well padded and fully reclining seats that were the trademark of Pan Am first class seating. Sitting down and buckling their safety belts after placing their respective hand luggage in their overhead bin, they then waited patiently as the plane filled up with passengers. One minute after nine o'clock, the jumbo jet was towed away from its ramp, then started rolling on its own power down a taxiway. Another ten minutes and the four-engine B-747-121 was lifting off the runway, on its way to Tokyo, with a scheduled short stop in San Francisco.

15:50 (Japan Time)

Sunday, December 16, 1973

Arrival terminal, Haneda Airport

Tokyo, Japan

Having waited in line behind John in front of one of the Japanese Customs wickets at the arrival terminal of Haneda Airport, Patricia stepped forward on a signal from the customs officer, a mature man with some gray in his hair. She then gave him a

warm smile while presenting her passport to the Japanese official and spoke to him in English.

"Good afternoon, sir! Here is my passport."

The man's glance, which he meant to be cursory, actually turned into a near stare as he was struck by her incredible beauty and sexy body. Finally shaking himself back into a cold, official attitude, the customs officer examined for a moment her passport and asked her a short question in a fair but accented English.

"What is the purpose of your visit to Japan, Miss Love?"

"Tourism! I am on vacation."

The man nodded his head once and stamped her passport before giving it back to Patricia.

"Welcome to Japan, Miss Love. NEXT!"

Putting back her passport inside her purse, Patricia joined John, who had been waiting past the customs wicket.

"Not exactly an overwhelmingly warm welcome, I must say."

"All a façade, Patricia. The Japanese are on average a warm, nice people. They just hate to show their emotions in public. Well, let's get our luggage. Once done with that, we will take the monorail line that links this airport and downtown Tokyo."

Getting their luggage from one of the luggage carousels of the arrival terminal and clearing the customs checks, the duo went to the monorail terminus station linked to the airport and bought seats on the next train to the Hammamatsucho Station, in the Minato Ward of downtown Tokyo. As their train rolled along its elevated line at speeds of up to fifty miles per hour, Patricia admired the lights of the metropolis in the growing darkness. Since the line had been built along the coast, she was also able to admire the panorama of Tokyo Bay.

"This monorail truly gives a good look of Tokyo to the incoming visitors, don't you think, John?"

"Maybe," replied her friend with apparently little enthusiasm, "but, in order to build this monorail line along the shores of this bay, they destroyed a number of ancient and popular fish farms. I believe that Japan lost in that exchange."

"How long ago was your last visit to Japan, John?"

"Three years ago. Then, I had found that the Tokyo I knew had changed quite a bit in only a few years. I wonder if I will get the same experience this time."

As their train approached downtown Tokyo, John was able to see that things had effectively changed again.

"Well, I see that they completed the World Trade Center Building in Minato Ward. I can see its lights now. It was supposed to count forty levels and was due to become Japan's tallest skyscraper."

"They sure seem to love neon signs around in Tokyo: I can see them everywhere."

"Downtown Tokyo is effectively quite colorful, Patricia. You will most probably find pleasure in doing some shopping in this city."

"Is there any place you would recommend to me where I could find new and original underwear and outfits for my strip shows?"

John smiled, amused by her question.

"For that, you definitely have to visit the Shinjuku Ward, a bit to the north of the Minato Ward: it is the city's center for sexual amusement and entertainment. You will find plenty of sex shops there with a large collection of often outrageous, sexy outfits."

"Really? Then I must go visit it soon. I hope that you will come with me then."

"Of course, my dear!"

Twenty minutes later, they came out of their train at the Hamamatsucho Station, which was partially under and directly connected to the World Trade Center Building. Taking a taxi at one of the station's exits, John had the driver bring him and Patricia to a small, discreet hotel in Minato Ward, the Hotel Ibis Roppongi. John smiled to Patricia as he opened his cab door.

"The Ibis Roppongi may not be the biggest nor the most luxurious hotel in Tokyo, but it is a quiet one and it is also well situated near two subway lines and within walking distance of the bars and clubs of the Roppongi District. It will do fine for us."

Going out of the taxi as well, Patricia took her two suitcases, travel bag and purse and, carrying the lot without apparent effort, followed John inside the entrance lobby of the Ibis Roppongi Hotel. She let John talk to the receptionist but kept her ears open in order to familiarize herself with the tones of spoken Japanese, which she could understand thanks to her magical ability to speak any tongue from sentient beings. The Japanese inscriptions around the lobby were however opaque to her, as she could not read or write Japanese...yet. *'Well, I already know how to read and write in eight languages. I*

can hardly be faulted for being illiterate in Japanese.' She thought to herself as she entered an elevator cabin with John to go to their room on the fourth floor. Unfortunately, those Humans who actually believed in angels and demons too often thought of demons as being only cruel, hideous beasts with typically low intellectual abilities. In that they were sorely mistaken. In fact, far from being mostly monstrous beasts, demons were generally humanoid in shape and often possessed physical and intellectual abilities superior to common mortals. Most importantly, demons had access to magic, something very few Humans had. She cut her mental introspection when their cabin stopped on the fourth floor. Walking out of the cabin, the couple went down a carpeted hallway, with John stopping in front of a door and unlocking it with one of the two keys provided by the receptionist.

"Room 422: our nest in Tokyo for this vacation. Sorry that I couldn't get Room 666, Patricia."

Patricia smirked at John's attempt at a joke but didn't say a word in reply. Walking in the room, she found it rather small but comfortable enough, with a large bed occupying most of the space. The bathroom to the right of the entrance was also small but had all the amenities. Patricia could in fact favorably compare that bathroom with many hotel 'bathrooms' she had seen in Paris until her departure from France in 1972. Taking five minutes to unpack her bags, she then stripped off her clothes.

"I'm going to take a quick shower to refresh myself after this thirteen hour flight. Feel free to join me under the shower, John."

John Hideyoshi admired for a moment her young, sexy body and fabulous chest before starting to remove his own clothes.

"How could I say no to such an invitation? I'll soap you up if you soap me up."

"Deal!"

Two minutes later, they were standing together under the water spray of the shower head, with their hands roaming freely, rubbing soap all over the other's body and concentrating on strategic places. John shivered with pleasure as Patricia started expertly massaging and licking his penis after she had rinsed away the soap. She kept at it until he came with a groan of intense pleasure. Taking over the sexual stimulating, John fondled and licked Patricia's breasts while rubbing her clitoris, then impaled her with his rock-hard penis when she appeared close to orgasm. Ramming her in and out at an infernal rate like a jackhammer, he soon had her scream with ecstasy.

"OOOH! KEEP IT UP! KEEP IT UP!...AAARG!"

She let out a final sigh of contentment as he exploded inside her. Hugging John and offering her breasts to the much smaller man, she grinned to him.

"You did a hell of a job as usual, John. We should take vacations together more often."

"I wouldn't mind that, my beautiful Patricia, but I do have a few businesses to take care of. Talking of business, I will want to go visit after supper a refuge that I support in Shinjuku."

"Sounds like a good plan."

19:32 (Japan Time)

Kabukicho District, Shinjuku Ward

Tokyo

Patricia had to say that she was a bit confused by the time their taxi driver stopped his cab in front of a small building somewhere in Shinjuku. While the main streets and boulevards had names, many small streets did not. Worse, the door numbering seemed to follow no logic, at least in her mind, with numbers apparently placed at random. However, she could see the front of a small bar sandwiched between two shops, with a painted sign above the entrance door saying in both Japanese and English 'The Lost Souls Bar'. Her sharp eyes also saw the magical runes discreetly etched around the frame of the bar's entrance. There were few passersby on the sidewalk, the street they were in being both narrow and poorly lit. Strangely enough, she saw four young Japanese men dressed in leather coats and jeans, sitting on their motorcycles or standing beside them, and this right in front of the entrance of the bar. As Patricia and John were stepping out of the taxi after paying their fare, they saw the four bikers suddenly converge on a graying Japanese man who was about to enter the bar, blocking his path. An altercation in Japanese ensued, making John approach Patricia and speak to her in Draconic, concern in his tone.

"Those bikers are trying to stop that man from entering the magical refuge I am supporting in Tokyo. I know the man, by the way: he is an old regular of 'The Lost Souls Bar'. Follow me closely but don't intervene yet: I will try to find out what is going on."

"Got it!"

Staying three steps behind John, Patricia walked with him to the entrance of the bar, where one of the bikers turned around to face them and spoke harshly in Japanese.

"Go away! Nobody is allowed inside this bar."

"And may I ask why?" Said John while looking the biker directly into his eyes.

"Because that bar lacked respect towards Yamagushi-san, who controls this area of Shinjuku. Now, go, you and your gaijin friend!"

John understood at once what was going on and turned his head to speak with Patricia in English.

"Apparently, the local Yakuza boss took badly to the fact that my refuge is refusing to pay protection money. Those bikers are so-called 'bosozoku', street toughs on motorcycles who often work for Yakuza² families in Tokyo. I will now take care of these bikers...quietly."

Looking back at the four bikers, John waved his left hand and said one word in Draconic.

"SLEEP!"

The four bikers crumpled at once to the ground, deeply asleep, where they started snoring. John smiled to the few passersby who hesitated and stopped on seeing that.

"They had too much sake tonight. Just let them sleep it off." He said, while mentally radiating a 'suggestion' spell to reinforce his words. The Japanese around him then went on with their business, walking past the sleeping bikers. Patricia joined up with John as the latter bowed politely to the man who had been trying to enter the bar.

"I am sorry if those bosozoku tried to stop you, Junko. Have they been causing trouble here for a while?"

The man returned his bow, bending lower than him, before answering him.

"It started last week, Hideyoshi-sama. Until then, your bar was seemingly too low key to attract the greed of the local Yakuza boss. Now, they want your bar manager to give fifteen percent of her revenues to Shinzo Yamagushi as a 'protection fee'. Yoko refused to pay, so those bikers were sent by Yamagushi to harass the customers and would-be patrons of the bar."

"And, this Shinzo Yamagushi, is he easy to find?"

Junko smirked at that question.

"Everybody around here knows where to find him, Hideyoshi-sama: he owns the local police, so he doesn't even need to hide. He runs his business from the 'Peeping Tom' strip club, which is situated less than four blocks from here on Kuyakusho Dori."

² Yakuza : Japanese organized crime families. Very powerful and influential in Japan.

"I see! Please come into the bar and have a drink on me. I will go speak with Yoko."

Walking in the bar behind John and Junko, Patricia found it to be quite small by American standards, with only a few tables and a bar with a few stools. The place was also quite unimpressive in terms of decoration and finish, but was very clean. She could understand now why that bar had not attracted the greed of the local crime boss earlier on. There was actually only one customer present, a big and powerful Japanese man, who was sitting at the bar's counter, while a Japanese woman in her forties was rounding the counter and coming towards the newcomers, a happy smile on her face.

"John! It is so nice to see you again! Welcome back to Tokyo!"

"Thank you, Yoko." Replied John before hugging with affection the petite woman dressed in a traditional kimono. "I just saw that you are having some trouble with the local crime boss."

The barmaid made a pinched smile as she stepped back from John.

"Indeed! They have been chasing away most of my customers and protégés for a week now and I was getting really worried about keeping the bar solvent. The local Yakuza boss, Shinzo Yamagushi, is asking for fifteen percent of my recipes as protection money. When I refused, he sent bosozoku gang members in his employ to block the access to the bar. Only a few customers, like Miramoto here, have been able to enter the bar thanks to their strength and size."

John bowed down in response to the big man sitting at the counter.

"Thank you for your loyal patronage of the bar, Miramoto-san."

"Well, I couldn't let those little thugs intimidate me, Hideyoshi-sama." Replied the customer, bowing deeply to John. "May I ask who is your nice friend?"

John smiled and partly turned around to pat Patricia's shoulder.

"This is a very good friend who lives like me in Los Angeles, Patricia Love. She is a female Oni³."

The barmaid couldn't help instinctively take a step back then.

"An Oni? But, her aura is a neutral one."

³ Oni : Demon in Japanese.

"I know! She is actually a very special, nice Oni, Yoko." Said John before looking at Patricia. "Yoko Minegami, the barmaid and manager of the bar, is an Aasimar⁴ and has reasons to fear any Oni."

Patricia smiled benevolently at those words and bowed deeply to the barmaid.

"Have no fear of me, Yoko-san: I myself have some Celestial blood in me and was actually run out of the Abyss by other demons because I was considered an abomination there."

"Then, you are most welcome in my modest bar, Patricia-san. So, what shall we do about this protection racket business, John? If I pay that protection money, then I will quickly have to declare bankruptcy, as my profit margin is very thin most of the time." John nodded his head once, his expression sober.

"I know! However, too many people in difficult situations need the services of your bar, which must stay open. We could pay the protection fee asked by that Yamagushi bastard, but then there would be no guarantees that he would not progressively increase his protection fee to the point when this bar would have to close, save for extensive financial support from me. There is also a question of principle involved: if we bend to one bastard, where will it stop? I also refuse to pay that protection money, Yoko, so we will have to find another solution to this problem."

"We could kill that Yamagushi bastard, Hideyoshi-sama." Then proposed Miramoto while making his big knuckles crack. John was about to reply to that when Patricia jumped in.

"I agree with Miramoto, John, but we will need to get rid of his whole gang...in a way that would not point to this bar or to us. I say, let's go kill silently those leeches, then put fire to their den to eliminate any incriminating links to this bar."

"I like that!" Said Miramoto at once, a big grin on his face, making Patricia smile in turn.

"Hey, I may be a nice Oni, but I am also a very bad girl. So, what do you say, John?"

John thought over those words for a moment before speaking.

⁴ Aasimar : A mixed-blood child of a Human and of a Celestial. An Aasimar is always of 'Good' alignment and often possesses some minor magical powers. Aasimars are normally killed on sight by demons.

"This is what we will do: we go to that strip club run by Yamagushi and ask to speak with him. If he proves inflexible, then we will get rid of him and of his goons in a way that won't allow the police or other Yakuza bosses to trace their deaths to here or to us. Patricia, I suggest that we modify a bit our aspects before going to this 'Peeping Tom' club, so that no witness could point to us afterwards."

"A good idea, John. First, though, I need to know if this bar has some secure basement rooms similar to those you have at your 'Friends' Corner Bar'."

"We do have such rooms, Patricia-san." Said Yoko Minegami. "We have a few lycanthropes among our customers, including Miramoto-san here, and periodically need to have them securely locked up during full moon periods."

"Do you also have vampires among your customers?"

"We have three of them, Patricia-San. Why do you ask?"

"Because I intend to add the useful to the satisfying stuff tonight. If we are to spill blood, then we might as well put that blood to good use. For that, I need a safe and discrete place to bring in a few still breathing bastards. Then, Miramoto-san, you will be free to extract and store away that blood...the way you will like the most."

While Yoko Minegami winced at those words, Miramoto rubbed his hands together, a wide grin on his face.

"Aaah, that sounds like a very satisfying way of doing things, Patricia-san. You can count on me for that."

"Good! Now, I only need to visit the bar's basement before going, so that I can mentally picture where I will be teleporting to."

"You can teleport?" Said Yoko, shocked. "But, that involves superior magic!" John nodded his head once at those words.

"Indeed, Yoko. Patricia is actually an Oni of very high lineage, with magical powers that exceed even my own powers in certain domains."

Yoko looked at Patricia with renewed respect, as she knew how powerful John was.

"Very well! I will show you my basement rooms, then will get the things needed to collect and store blood. It would only be poetic justice for that Yamagushi bastard to end up helping me sustain my vampire customers."

20:29 (Japan Time)

'Peeping Tom' strip club

Kuyakusho Dori, Kabukicho District

John Hideyoshi, now looking like a much older man than his normal human appearance and accompanied by a Patricia that had adopted the form of Sylvia Thorn, stopped in front of one of the two Yakuza men flanking the entrance to the 'Peeping Tom' strip club and spoke to him in an authoritative tone.

"I need to speak with Yamagushi-san, right away!"

Unsure of who John was and unwilling to possibly insult someone that could be another Yakuza boss, the gangster chose to reply in a polite tone while bowing.

"May I ask who to announce to Yamagushi-san?"

"Tell him that Ojizo-sama, from Los Angeles, wants to speak with him."

The gangster bowed again quickly, then signaled to John and Sylvia/Delicia to follow him before entering the club. They crossed the inside of a large, semi-darkened room where dozens of male customers were watching a young woman strip on an illuminated stage, then went up a large staircase, to finally arrive on the top floor, on the third level. There, the gangster led the couple to a large double-door guarded by two more gangsters, who eyed John and Sylvia with professional curiosity and suspicion. The man who had guided the couple faced John after stopping in front of the guarded door.

"Please wait here while I announce you to Yamagushi-san."

The gangster then went in, closing the door behind him. He was back after maybe a minute and bowed to John.

"You may come in with your companion, Ojizo-sama."

As the couple walked in, the gangster made a sign to one of the men guarding the door, who then entered behind Sylvia. The visitors found themselves in a big, luxurious lounge furnished in the Western style with sofas, low tables and shelves. One side of the room was lined with large windows that were presently obscured by drawn curtains. In one corner of the room, a man with gray hair sitting in a sofa was watching a pair of naked girls performing sex acts on each other on top of a carpet. John couldn't help feel indignation on seeing that the two girls were actually mere children barely past puberty. Controlling his anger, John walked to the man in the sofa, who was sipping on a glass of scotch, and stopped maybe six paces in front of him, leaving the two naked girls between him and the man. As for Sylvia, she stayed three paces behind John, watching and listening but staying silent as John spoke in Japanese.

"My name is John Ojizo, from Los Angeles. I came here to speak with you about the 'Lost Souls Bar'."

From deferential at first, the man in the sofa then showed some confusion.

"The 'Lost Souls Bar'? But, that is a nothing place! Why are you interested in it and who are you exactly, Ojizo-sama?"

"I am a sponsor of the 'Lost Souls Bar', along with a few other establishments around the United States and the World. I am my own master and owe allegiance to no one, not even to the American Mafia. I came to tell you that I will not pay protection money to you for my bar."

From confused, the Yakuza boss became nearly adversarial, although he kept his tone polite.

"I am sorry, Ojizo-sama, but here in Tokyo you will have to toe the line drawn by me and other Yakuza bosses if you wish to operate a business here. In Kabukicho, everybody follows my rules and your little bar will have to do the same, or suffer the consequences. By the way, your bar already owes me two weeks of insurance money."

"And I am sorry to hear that you are unwilling to be reasonable, Yamagushi-san." As the two men in the back of John and Sylvia tensed up and approached their right hand to the weapons hidden inside their vests, Yamagushi abruptly put down his glass and shot a murderous glare at John.

"And what are you planning to do then? Have your gaijin female friend attack me?"

That brought a mean smile on John's lips.

"Oh, she certainly could take care of you and your goons all by herself, Yamagushi-san, but I am still quite able to do the job by myself."

Half turning around, John spoke a few words in Draconic to Sylvia.

"You take care of him and the girls, while I take care of the others."

"Got it!" Simply said Sylvia, who then moved with lightning speed, jumping over the two naked young girls and landing in front of Yamagushi, then grabbing the Yakuza boss by his collar with a single hand and lifting him high off his feet with no apparent effort, choking him and making his face turn red. With the Yakuza wiggling helplessly in her grip, she looked down at the two naked girls and made a 'Charm' spell to calm them down and keep them quiet. As for John, he had already put the bodyguards to sleep, including the one left outside the door of the suite.

"I am your friend. Please stay quietly where you are and let me and my friend handle these bastards."

With the two girls nodding in acquiescence and sitting on the carpet, Sylvia looked up at the half-strangled Yamagushi.

"You must have a safe here for your valuables and illegal things: show it to me and open it, or I will break your neck."

The terrorized Yakuza boss could only point at a door on one wall of the lounge.

"My...study..."

Roughly putting the man down, Sylvia then dragged him forcefully towards the door, then entered a luxurious work office with him in tow.

"Show me your safe and then open it, quickly!"

Instead of obeying her, Yamagushi's right hand flew to his belt, obviously trying to grab a weapon there. Sylvia was however even faster and intercepted his hand, crushing it with inhuman strength and making the half-choked Yakuza shout with pain.

"Feel like playing smart ass, hey?"

Using her free hand, Sylvia extracted a revolver that had been held in a belt holster and examined it briefly: it was a low-quality .32 caliber snub-nosed revolver that made her sneer in disdain.

"You call yourself a crime boss and you can't get anything better than this? They would laugh at you in Los Angeles. Now, open your safe!"

Still held solidly by his collar and being barely able to breathe, Yamagushi staggered towards a large painting hooked to a wall behind a work desk. Watched closely by Sylvia, he made the painting pivot on hidden hinges, revealing the door of a fair-sized safe behind it.

"The safe behind the painting: an old trick indeed! Open it!"

For even better measure, she pressed the muzzle of the revolver taken on him against the head of Yamagushi.

"Remember: no games!"

Overwhelmed, the Yakuza boss turned the knob on the safe's door, with Sylvia watching and memorizing the combination he made, then pulled down on the safe's handle, opening it with a 'clac'. The moment the safe was open, Sylvia violently struck Yamagushi on the temple with the butt of her revolver, knocking him out. Letting him crumple to the floor, Sylvia put on first the gloves held inside the pockets of her long coat, so that she wouldn't leave fingerprints behind, then started emptying the safe, spreading its content on top of the big work desk nearby.

"Hum, lots of Japanese cash money, as expected. Also, lots of American dollars: no surprises there either. One .45 caliber Colt pistol, loaded and ready to use: at least that guy took some precautions. Quite a few documents and ledgers that should prove worthy of John's attention. Whoa! What are all these passports?"

Sifting through the more than twenty passports from various countries that had been in the safe, Sylvia saw that they belonged to as many young women, mostly of Asian origin, all of them very pretty. She quickly understood what those passports were.

"This bastard must be holding against their will many girls he employs as either strippers or prostitutes, keeping their passports to ensure that they don't flee back to their country. They are probably locked up in some part of this club when not performing."

Two Japanese school identity cards that had been with the passports in the safe proved to belong to the two naked girls that had been entertaining the Yakuza boss tonight. A glance at their dates of birth made Sylvia frown.

"Eleven and twelve years old. A fucking pedophile bastard on top of everything else."

The last items she took out of the safe were six book-sized packages wrapped in brown paper. Opening one of the packages, she found it full of fine white powder.

"Heroin! Over seven pounds of it and probably uncut yet."

Next, she searched Yamagushi himself, finding a set of keys in one vest pocket, a good-sized pack of Japanese banknotes and some spare bullets for a .32 caliber revolver. Looking around quickly, she found a large travel bag in a closet and used it to collect all the cash money, the pistol and the passports taken from the safe, while she pocketed the set of keys found on Yamagushi. As for the packs of heroine, she put them inside a steel garbage can, which she brought to the adjacent bathroom, then approached one hand to it. A long flame burst out of her hand, igniting the wrapped drug packs. As the flames consumed the heroin in the garbage can, Sylvia left the bathroom and closed its door, then grabbed again the unconscious Yamagushi and pulled him up against her body, then concentrated and teleported out of the office.

She reappeared with her captive in a basement room of the 'Lost Souls Bar' that was used to safely keep lycanthropes who were being affected in periods of full moon, a room that had originally been built as a bomb shelter during World War 2. She found

Miramoto and Junko waiting there, with ropes, knives, steel basins, empty glass bottles and a funnel at the ready.

"Here is your first customer, guys: Shinzo Yamagushi in person. Have fun with him while I go get his goons."

"Oh, he will have plenty of time to feel it before bleeding out." Promised Miramoto, a big grin on his face and a large butcher knife in one hand. As for Junko, he was already thirsty for all that blood that was going to flow.

"Death by a thousand cuts?" Asked Sylvia/Delicia.

"Nah: too wasteful of blood. A hundred cuts will do."

Feeling no remorse or pity about the fate awaiting the gangster, Sylvia jumped back to Yamagushi's office, where she grabbed the travel bag full of money and documents before joining up with John and showing him the passports and identity cards she had found.

"I believe that this bastard is holding a number of foreign girls in this club as sex slaves, plus those two girls, who are Japanese. By the way, they are eleven and twelve. I found plenty of cash money that we could then give to those unfortunate girls, so that they could return to their respective countries. There are also quite a few documents in Japanese that you may be interested to read and translate later on."

John's face hardened on hearing that.

"I will take care of finding these girls and free them. In the meantime, transport out those slime bags to the bar's basement: they amply deserve death for their crimes."

"With pleasure, John!"

As Sylvia disappeared with two of the Yakuza bodyguards, John went to see the two naked young Japanese girls still sitting on the carpet, who had watched with bulging eyes Sylvia teleport out. Kneeling beside them, he gave them a reassuring smile.

"You will soon be able to return safely to your real home, girls. I will ask you now to dress quietly but quickly."

The oldest girl couldn't help ask a question then, her face reflecting both awe and disbelief.

"How could that woman disappear like that? Who are you?"

"My friend holds quite a few magical powers, like me, little one. I have been known in Japan for centuries as Ojizo-sama, patron deity and guardian of children, both

living and dead ones. Buddhists in India also know me as Ksitigarbha. Now, please dress, quickly.”

Nodding their heads, the two girls then ran into a bathroom adjacent to the lounge, returning fully dressed a few minutes later. John used that time to start sifting through the papers and documents found by Delicia in Yamagushi's safe. He smiled to himself when he saw that he now had enough information and documentary evidence to destroy the man's network of businesses and dirty connections in Tokyo...if he did things the right way. He already could see that a number of police officers and judges were on Yamagushi's payroll, which meant that he would need to operate cautiously when he was going to get Yamagushi's sex slaves out of Tokyo, lest some corrupt official creates legal or bureaucratic problems for him and the girls. John however had already an idea about how to best use those documents.

Waiting first for the return of Sylvia, so that she could watch over the two little girls, John then put an 'Invisibility' spell on himself and left the suite to effect a detailed search of the building, the keys found on Yamagushi in his coat pocket. He didn't have to search for long, as he found six of Yamagushi's goons relaxing and playing cards in a room on the next floor down from Yamagushi's suite. A steel door with heavy locking bolts was visible on one wall of that room.

'Hum! It would make sense to place a detention area next to the guardroom. I will however need to get rid of those gangsters before I could go check that locked room.'

John actually solved that problem easily and quickly enough: he simply uttered a 'Sleep' spell that made the six Yakuza men drop or crumple into a deep slumber. That however did not fully satisfy him: a sudden strong noise or accidental touch, possibly by one of the girls held in this club, could still awaken one or more of those men. Seeing a pistol equipped with a silencer that was lying on top of a table, near one of the sleeping men, John grabbed it, then turned visible again. He was normally a kind, considerate and compassionate being, but his centuries of existence on Earth had taught him that violence was sometimes necessary for the greater good. He hesitated only slightly before shooting the sleeping gangsters one by one in the head, killing all six men in seconds. Then slipping the pistol inside his belt, John went to the steel door and opened it. Beyond it was a large room whose windows had been boarded shut, with over twenty beds dispersed along the walls and with a table, chairs and sofas in the center of the

room. A television set and a radio were visible in one corner. What attracted John's attention at once, though, was the eight young women in various states of dress present in the room. The women stopped whatever they were doing at once and eyed John with caution and fear as he walked in the room.

"Please don't be afraid, ladies: I am a friend who came to free you. I was led to believe that there would be more of you. Where are the others?"

An Oriental woman took on her to answer him in passable Japanese after a moment of hesitation.

"They must be performing in the main hall of the club or in the private showrooms on the ground floor, mister. Can you really free us?"

John answered by stepping aside, making visible to the girls the dead Yakuza men around their card table. The women gasped nearly in unison on seeing the bloodied corpses. John then went to the table in the center of the room and put down on it the travel bag that he had been carrying by its shoulder strap. Signaling to the eight women to gather around him, he opened the bag and started distributing some of the passports inside it to their legitimate owners, making them swoon with joy.

"Ladies, I will now ask you to get dressed in order to leave this club. If you have coats with you, take them as well. I will watch the door while you dress. And please do it quietly!"

Fortunately, he did not have to repeat himself, the women being too well aware of what would happen if some of Yamagushi's men showed up. Less than ten minutes later, all the women were back around the table, some carrying small bags full of spare clothes or holding a coat. Counting quickly the bundles of cash inside his travel bag, John gave to each woman a bundle of 100,000 yen, equivalent to a thousand dollars, plus another bundle totaling a thousand American dollars, which they gratefully took.

"This money is meant to allow you to leave Japan as soon as possible and return to your respective countries once I will lead you out of this club. Do not, and I say again, do not contact the Japanese police in order to file a complaint: many local cops are in the pay of Yamagushi and would probably find an excuse to arrest and detain you. For those of you who have been detained here long enough to have your Japanese visas expire, I will try to arrange support from your respective embassies, so that you can board a flight out without being bothered by the Japanese authorities, who are frankly a bit too complicit with the Yakuza in this criminal scheme. Now, follow me upstairs to

Yamagushi's suite, where a friend of mine is waiting while protecting two more girls. This place here is way too risky for you now. Remember: be quiet and stay with me."

Cautiously checking first if anybody was in the external hallway and staircase, John then led his eight charges up to Yamagushi's suite, where he found Sylvia standing inside the partially opened door of the suite and watching the stairs.

"Here are more girls to watch over, Sylvia. There are more still inside the club but they are said to be presently performing downstairs. However, they will eventually be led back to their detention room on the next floor down, so I will wait for them there and will also at the same time eliminate any goon escorting them."

"Sounds like a plan, John. By the way, if you are to do more silent killing, then take this with you."

John smiled with glee when Sylvia handed him an exquisitely decorated Katana long sword in its lacquered wood scabbard.

"I believe that this was Yamagushi's family sword. Make good use of it."

"I sure will! Thanks, Sylvia! Alright girls, get inside and make yourselves comfortable: it may be a while before we could lead you safely out of the club."

22:36 (Japan Time)

Main showroom, 'Peeping Tom' strip club

The stage manager for the club looked again in frustration at his watch: the second act strippers should have come down by now, while the first act girls were about due to leave their posts on the stage and in private showrooms. Grabbing the nearest muscle man, he gave him an order on a tone that didn't leave room for discussion.

"Jiro, go upstairs and tell that Toramon idiot that he was supposed to escort down the second shift of girls over twenty minutes ago."

"Hay!" Replied with a quick bow the Yakuza man before nearly running to the main staircase outside the showroom. The young man soon stepped on the second floor and pushed open the door of the guardroom.

"TORAMON, KAGAMOTSU-SAN WANTS..."

Jiro then stopped cold on the spot and his eyes bulged at the sight of the six dead bodies littering the guardroom. His right hand was flying to his hidden knife when a slight noise behind him made him pivot around. He just had time to have a glimpse of

an old Japanese man swinging a saber before the blade cleanly cut his head off, plunging him into darkness. John Hideyoshi looked down at the decapitated body with regret.

"You could have done so much better with your life, young man. Now, you will spend the rest of eternity in Hell."

Taking back his hidden ambush position, John waited patiently for either more Yakuza thugs to show up or for more girls to return to their living lounge. After over twenty minutes and with nobody else showing up, he opened a telepathic conversation with Sylvia.

"Sylvia, things are not moving here and I don't want for these girls to stay longer than necessary in this club. Yamagushi's lieutenants could decide to call in outside reinforcement in order to investigate what is happening above the main show room, something that could put the girls at risk. How about accelerating the process by ourselves?"

"I agree! Here is what I suggest: you go down to the girls' changing rooms on the ground floor and collect them, then I will create a distraction and force the evacuation of the club by starting a fire on the top floors."

"Sounds like a plan! I will now come up to collect the girls we already have, along with the remaining passports and money taken from Yamagushi, then will get the girls downstairs. Wait for my signal before putting the place on fire."

"Got it!"

John was soon on his way down to the ground level under the cover of an 'Invisibility' spell, his pockets full of passports and money and with the katana sword still in his right hand. The few Yakuza men and club employees he encountered were put asleep via spells or killed with his sword. The one Yakuza thug guarding the changing room used by the strippers ended up being eviscerated by a powerful slash of the katana that opened his belly wide, spilling his intestines all over the floor. As the dying man convulsed in a pool of blood, John calmly walked inside the changing room, where he found five young women in various states of undress. As the girls stared with fear and horror at his blood-stained sword, John spoke to them in a calm voice, intent on reassuring them.

"Do not fear, ladies: I am here to save you from this life of slavery. We will soon be able to leave this club, but I will need first that you get dressed. In the meantime, I will be giving you back your passports, which Yamagushi took away from you."

"But, Yamagushi-san will hunt us down if we leave." Said one terrified girl. John shook his head at that.

"No, he won't: he is dead and so are nearly all of his men by now. Now, take your passports and identity papers and get dressed, quickly!"

Still not sure what exactly was going on, the girls however obeyed him, taking their documents and dressing up with what clothes they had in the changing room. Thankfully, the wardrobe in the changing room was filled with numerous outfits of all kinds, meant to provide a wide choice of things to wear at the start of stripping acts. When his group was ready after another ten minutes or so, and with four strip girls still performing on stage or in private boots, John decided that they could wait no longer. Making the girls with him fill four bags with clothes meant for the girls still in the show room, he then sent a telepathic message to Sylvia.

"Sylvia, you can start putting the place on fire. Escort down your girls at the same time. We will meet outside of the main entrance."

"Understood!" Replied Sylvia, still hiding in Yamagushi's suite on the top floor. She then looked at the eight young women and two teenagers sitting quietly around the lounge and looking nervously at her.

"Alright girls: time to move out! Be quiet, don't panic and stay with me. I will now start a few fires on the top floors as we go down, in order to create a confusion and facilitate your escape. Again, stay together with me and don't panic. Now, start going out of this suite and wait for me in the hallway."

The ten girls obeyed her at once, too happy to finally escape this place. Once they were all in the hallway, by the main staircase, Sylvia approached the drapes covering the windows of the suite's lounge and joined her spread hands by their thumbs.

"BURNING HANDS!"

A sheet of flames shot out of her hands in a wide cone, enveloping the drapes and putting them on fire. For good measure, she went into Yamagushi's bedroom and private office and started fires there as well before joining the girls in the hallway as a smoke detector finally reacted to the fires she had initiated and triggered a loud alarm bell.

"Well, you heard the alarm, girls: let's evacuate this building!"

The Bronze Citadel

Avernus, First Layer of the Abyss

Abyssal Realm (Hell)

When Jiro regained some of his sight, he was shocked to find himself completely naked while standing on a metallic floor in semi-darkness. Raising his left hand and touching his neck, he was somewhat reassured to find that his head still seemed firmly attached to his body: he must have just had a bad dream. A thunderous voice then shook him up.

“THAT WAS REALITY, NOT A BAD DREAM, JIRO!”

Jiro then saw with a mix of fear and horror the huge, terrifying humanoid beast sitting on a bronze throne in front of him, ten paces away. It looked like a red-skinned medieval gargoyle with a pair of large leathery wings. It also had a pair of big horns on his forehead, a pair of large fangs in his mouth and claws on its fingers. The beast’s eyes glowed a fierce red.

“Where...where am I?” Jiro barely managed to ask. The crack of a whip and a searing wave of pain from his back immediately followed his words, with the beast bending forward to speak to him in a dangerous tone.

“I ASK THE QUESTIONS HERE, JIRO. YOU WILL SPEAK ONLY WHEN ASKED TO, UNLESS YOU WANT TO TASTE THE WHIP SOME MORE. YOU ARE NOW IN MY PALACE ON AVERNUS, THE FIRST LAYER OF THE ABYSS, AND MY NAME IS BEL, LORD OF THE FIRST. YOU WILL HOWEVER CALL ME SIMPLY ‘MASTER’. YOU ARE IN HELL FOR ETERNITY AND YOU NOW BELONG TO ME, JIRO.”

“But...but...OUCH!”

As Jiro was grimacing in pain from the second lash of whip, the beast gave him a malevolent grin.

“AS I SAID BEFORE, YOU WILL TALK ONLY WHEN ASKED TO. SO, YOU WERE A MINION FOR A SO-CALLED CRIMINAL LORD?”

“I was a soldier of Yamagushi-san, from the Inagawa-kai family.” Objected Jiro, attracting a third lash on his back. Bel then corrected him.

“ALWAYS FINISH YOUR SENTENCES WITH ‘MASTER’ WHEN YOU SPEAK TO ME. SO, YOU THINK OF YOURSELF AS A SOLDIER, HEY? I HAVE TO SAY

THAT I DO LIKE THE DISCIPLINE AND RESPECT TO SUPERIORS SHOWN BY YOUR YAKUZA BRETHREN. MAYBE YOU COULD ACTUALLY BE USEFUL TO ME...A BIT. YOU WILL HOWEVER HAVE TO PROVE YOUR LOYALTY TO ME, YOUR LORD, FIRST. IF YOU DO WELL, YOUR STAY HERE WILL BE TOLERABLE. IF YOU DON'T, THEN YOU WILL SPEND ETERNITY BEING TORTURED. IF YOU REALLY FUCK UP, THEN YOU WILL END IN THE SOUL SHREDDER AND YOU WILL DISAPPEAR FOR GOOD FROM THIS UNIVERSE."

Not wanting another lash on his back, Jiro didn't interrupt Bel and waited for him to continue, something that seemingly pleased the demon lord.

"WELL, YOU SEEM TO LEARN FAST ENOUGH: A GOOD POINT IN YOUR FAVOR. I WILL THUS NOW GIVE YOU YOUR FIRST TASK IN THE ABYSS."

A naked man suddenly appeared in front of Jiro, between him and Bel. He was covered with blood and had dozens of cuts on his body. Jiro's eyes opened wide when he recognized the haggard man.

"YAMAGUSHI-SAN?!"

He nearly bowed to Yamagushi but restrained himself at the last second, remembering who he was now supposed to serve. Bel smiled on seeing Jiro keep straight and not showing deference to one of the latest subjects to arrive for eternal punishment on the First Level. With a snap of his fingers, he made a whip appear in Jiro's right hand.

"UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, JIRO, YOUR TASK WILL BE TO PUNISH THIS DARK SOUL AS HE DESERVES. ANOTHER DEMON WILL GUIDE YOU AND THIS PIECE OF SHIT TO THE PUNISHMENT STATION I ASSIGNED TO HIM. SHOW NO MERCY OR RESPECT TO HIM AND BE ZEALOUS IN WHIPPING HIM. PROVE ME YOUR LOYALTY!"

"Yes, Master!" Said Jiro, bowing deeply to Bel before swinging his whip and lashing his old Yakuza boss on his back, making him shout in pain.

"START WALKING, YOU PIECE OF SHIT!"

A sort of dark red portal then appeared to one side, with Jiro directing Yamagushi towards it with liberal use of his whip. Both souls then disappeared through the portal. Bel straightened up on his bronze throne, satisfied.

"Those Japanese Yakuza men do really understand the meaning of the words 'discipline' and 'obedience'. Maybe I should get more of them for my armies."

00:18 (Japan Time)

Monday, December 17, 1973

Third floor, apartment building in Asakusa Ward, Tokyo

"Who could this be at such a hour?" Grumbled the man as he went to the door of his family's tiny apartment. Actually, 'family' was not a proper word to use anymore, as he and his wife had lost their only child over a year ago, when she had disappeared one morning on the way to school. Unlocking and opening the door, the man instantly froze at the sight of the young teenage girl standing in front of a man with graying hair.

"Kimi? KIMI!"

"FATHER!" Cried out the girl while throwing herself in the arms of her father. Both exchanged a long, frantic hug while the man covered with kisses the forehead and cheeks of his young daughter, both having tears now flowing from their eyes. The man finally looked into the eyes of Kimi while holding her by her shoulders.

"My poor Kimi! What happened to you? Where have you been?"

"Bad men from the Yakuza kidnapped me while I was walking to school, Father. They then used me as their slave, along with other girls." She didn't have time to continue before a piercing shriek came from inside the apartment.

"KIMI!"

Kimi's mother then ran across the small lounge of the apartment and was met in the middle by her daughter. They savored a long, tearful hug together before Kimi could repeat to her what she had just said to her father. Her mother kissed her again on both cheeks before looking suspiciously at the man still waiting quietly in the hallway.

"Who is this man, Kimi? Is he from the police?"

Kimi grinned in answer while pointing excitedly at the old man.

"He is the one who freed me from the Yakusa, along with other girls. He is a Kami, Mother!"

"A Kami? Come on, Kimi, you're not making any sense."

The old man then calmly entered the apartment, stopping just past the door, a benevolent smile on his face.

"Allow me to present myself, madam."

To the couple's stupor, the man then became progressively luminous from the inside, while his shape and appearance changed slowly. From a graying man in a suit, he turned into seconds into a Buddhist monk wearing a rough robe and holding a staff. His head was now shaved and a halo surrounded it.

"I am Ojizo-sama, guardian of children and patron of deceased children. I am deeply sorry that I failed for so long to help your poor daughter."

Both parents knelt and bowed deeply in reverence to the monk, as Ojizo-sama was one of the most loved divinities of the Japanese pantheon.

"Great Ojizo-sama, we could never thank you enough for having saved our little daughter. How could we ever repay you properly?" Said the father, still bowing on his knees. The monk smiled gently in response.

"Simple: raise your daughter with love and attention, my good man. Talking of repaying, here is something that I confiscated from the Yakuza men who kidnapped Kimi and held her into slavery. I know that getting your daughter back is more valuable than anything else, but this could at least help her readjust to a normal life. As for the Yakuza men who took her, they are now dead and paying for their sins for eternity in Hell."

The father hesitantly took the impressive bundle of yen banknotes handed over by the monk, then bowed again.

"Thank you, great Ojizo-sama! Thank you!"

The monk smiled again, then changed shape, returning to the one of the graying man in a business suit.

"I still have more freed girls to take care of, good people, so I must go now. Goodbye, little Kimi! May you have a happy life from now on."

The old man then disappeared in the blink of an eye, watched by the mesmerized family. Shaking off his stupor, the father then joined his wife and daughter in the middle of the lounge, where they shared a long group hug.

"This morning, we will go together to the local shrine and give offerings and prayers to Ojizo-sama." Decreed the father, getting nods from his wife and daughter.

Outside, down in the street, John Hideyoshi, still in the shape of an old man, sat back in the taxi that had brought him, Kimi, Sylvia and another girl to this district. When they had been able to scour the strip club and recuperate all the girls and women held in it, they had been shocked and angered to find out that no less than five teenage girls, all under the age of fourteen and one as young as eight, had been held in the club to satisfy

the lust of pedophile customers. Now, they had one girl left to return home, but this one was going to take more finesse to handle, as she was a Canadian citizen of Japanese descent. Giving a handful of Yen banknotes to the taxi driver, John spoke to him in a polite tone.

"Thank you for waiting, good man. Could you now drive us to the Canadian embassy?"

"Right away, sir!"

As the driver engaged gears, John looked down at the nine-year old girl sandwiched between him and Sylvia and spoke softly to her in English.

"Jennifer, we will now bring you to the Canadian embassy, where we will drop you. You still have your passport with you, along with the money I gave you so that you could buy a plane ticket to Vancouver?"

"I do, Ojizo-sama! Aren't you going to come inside the embassy with me, so that the people there could believe my story?"

John hesitate for a moment then: he had planned at first to simply drop off the little girl, in order to avoid too many embarrassing question from the embassy staff, but he now realized that the situation was way too delicate for such a young child to handle by herself.

"I will, my sweet Jennifer. You can count on me until the end."

The trio then fell mostly silent as the taxi made its way back from the Asakusa Ward to the Akasuka Ward, a good fifty mile ride that took them two hours in the still fairly dense Tokyo night traffic. When the taxi stopped in front of the building housing the Canadian embassy, John stepped out and took the hand of little Jennifer, walking with her to the entrance of the building. Inside, they found a lone security guard sitting behind a desk in the entrance lobby. The man got up from his chair and politely bowed to John when he approached his desk with Jennifer.

"May I help you, sir?"

"You may, mister. I need to bring this little girl to the Canadian embassy. She was separated from her parents and needs consular help."

"Oh, I see! Unfortunately, the Canadian embassy is closed at this late hour and will open again at nine o'clock only. Right now, there are only a couple of Canadian guards inside the embassy."

"Then, I will ask them to contact the consul or ambassador right away: this is an emergency."

"I am not sure that they will be willing to help you, sir, but you may still proceed up to the second floor, where the embassy entrance is. The elevators are to your left."

"Thank you, good man!"

Going to the bank of elevators with young Jennifer, John called a cabin, entering it as soon as the doors slid open. The ride to the second floor was short and he and Jennifer stepped out in a hallway covered with linoleum tiles. Seeing at the end of the short corridor a large panel saying 'Canadian embassy' in both Japanese and English, plus a Canadian flag, John went in that direction and pressed the button located beside a thick glass door. While waiting for a reaction, he smiled gently in front of the one-way tinted window near the door, behind which probably stood a guard. A voice was heard from a speaker nearly at once, speaking English.

"I am sorry, sir, but the embassy is closed."

"This is a consular emergency, mister. This little girl lost her parents during their trip to Tokyo and needs official Canadian assistance. I believe that there may in fact be a 'Missing' notice in her name."

"And what is her name, sir?"

"Jennifer Nomura. I will now open her passport and put it against your window." Gently taking the girl's passport from Jennifer and opening it at the page showing her photo and name, John then laid it flat against the bullet-proof glass of the mirror window. Long seconds followed before the man's voice was heard again.

"There is in fact a 'Missing' notice in the name of Jennifer Nomura, but it was published over nine months ago. Where did you find this girl, sir?" Starting to become impatient with the guard, John closed the passport and gave it back to Jennifer before giving his reply.

"In a strip club, where she had been held as a sex slave by a Yakuza boss. I believe that you should call your Canadian Police Attaché in, as well as your Consul, and quickly! I would however advise against contacting the Tokyo Police Department: some of its officers are in the Yakuza's pay."

There was a second long pause before another man's voice was heard.

"We will call the Canadian Police Attaché right away, sir. In the meantime, you may come in with the girl. Pull the door open at the noise of the buzzer."

"Thank you!"

Opening the door and entering with Jennifer, John found himself inside a small security airlock with a second armored glass door at the other end and with a bullet-proof wicket to one side. A big Caucasian man dressed in a suit stood behind the wicket and spoke once the first door had closed and locked.

"Could you take off your suit's jacket and slowly turn around, please."

Understanding that such a nightly unannounced visit called for some basic security measures, John obeyed the guard, removing his jacket and pivoting around with both arms up. That seemed to satisfy the guard, who pressed a button and made another buzz be heard.

"You can now pull the second door open and enter with the girl, sir."

"Thank you again!"

Coming out of the security airlock, John was met at once by another man, who was holding a metal detector stick.

"Please hold still for a moment with your arms up, sir."

After a few seconds of scanning with his stick, John was declared free of weapons and was then invited to go sit with Jennifer in one of the sofas lining the visitors' waiting lounge. There, the man with the scanner started asking him questions in a polite tone, a notepad and pen in hand.

"May I have your name and nationality, sir?"

"I am John Jizo and I am an American."

"May I see your passport, sir?"

"Of course!" Replied John, who then fished out his passport and handed it to the Canadian guard. It was actually his true passport, in the name of John Hideyoshi, but he cast a 'Magic I.D.' spell on it before passing it on. The guard opened the passport to the identification page, but his brain 'saw' the picture of a man with graying hair and the name 'John Jizo', along with a different date of birth and passport number, instead of what his eyes actually saw. He thus noted down the fake information before giving back the passport to John.

"Sergeant Nichols, from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, should be here in about half a hour, sir. He will be the one who will interview you and the girl."

"That is fine with me, mister, but I must insist again that you do not contact the Tokyo Police. This child is a direct witness and victim of serious crimes committed by the Yakuza in Tokyo and could be targeted for assassination by the Yakuza in order to

eliminate her as a witness. With many local cops in the pay of the Yakuza, this girl's life would be put at risk if you informed the Tokyo Police about her case."

Even if he showed some skepticism about John's story, the guard seemed to accept his logic and nodded his head.

"Sergeant Nichols will be the one to decide about the next steps to take, sir. In the meantime, would you like a cup of tea or coffee, or maybe the girl would like something?"

"Thank you, but I am alright." Said John before looking down at Jennifer, who was sitting beside him. "And you, Jennifer, do you want something?"

"I just want to call my parents at home." Said the girl in her tiny voice. The guard was about to voice an objection to that but a 'Suggestion' spell from John made him backtrack.

"Very well! Do you have the telephone number of your parents?"

"I believe that you may find it on the 'Missing' notice posted when she disappeared, mister." Offered John, making the guard smile meekly.

"Of course! Follow me, girl!"

"Speak only in Japanese with your parents, Jennifer." Said softly John in Japanese to the girl as she was about to follow the guard. "This guard could react negatively if he could hear and understand your story."

Little Jennifer, who now held John in near sainthood, nodded her head once silently before going.

She was back with the guard twenty minutes later, a happy smile on her face.

"I was able to speak with my mother at home in Vancouver, Ojizo-sama. My father was at work, but my mother told me that she was going to call him right away. In return, I promised to call again later in the day."

"Good! At least they now know that you are alive and well."

John nearly corrected himself then: Jennifer may be physically well, but her psyche had to have been hurt by all the horrible experiences she had lived through during the last nine months. Just at that moment a tall, wide-shouldered man in his late thirties and with his hair cut very short in military style came in through the security airlock. After briefly talking in whispers with the senior guard, the newcomer came to John, who got up from his sofa with Jennifer.

"Mister Jizo? I am Sergeant James Nichols, from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."

Shaking the hand offered by Nichols, John bowed as well in a typical Japanese salute.

"And I am happy to see you, Sergeant Nichols. This poor girl has gone through much and desperately needs the help of your government, as I am afraid that the Japanese police may be part of the problem here."

"One of the embassy guards did tell me on the telephone about your allegations of police collusion with the Yakuza, Mister Jizo."

"They are a lot more than just allegations, Sergeant Nichols. I have written evidence that a number of local police officers and judges were on the pay of the Yakuza boss who was holding Jennifer as a sex slave, along with many other girls."

Nichols stiffened on hearing the words 'many other girls'.

"And those other girls, where are they now? Are they still captive of the Yakuza?"

"Thankfully, no! I freed them at the same time as Jennifer. They are now on their way back home."

"Uh, this is most irregular, Mister Jizo: you could get into trouble with the Japanese Police, for interfering in a major criminal case."

"I don't care what the local authorities will think of my acts, Sergeant." Replied John firmly while staring in the eyes of the big, tall Canadian police officer. "The important thing is that those poor girls are now safe and on their way home."

"Are you an American federal agent or private investigator, Mister Jizo?"

"No! I am simply someone who cares deeply about children."

"He is the great Ojizo-sama, the patron deity of children, sir." Volunteered enthusiastically little Jennifer, making Nichols frown before he looked at John with some irritation.

"What kind of crazy story did you tell this girl, mister? You also need to tell me how you manage to free all these girls from the Yakuza."

John stared back calmly at the Canadian as his shape morphed to that of Jizo the monk, making Nichols take two steps back while his hand went to his service revolver at his belt.

"She is telling the truth, Sergeant. As for these Yakuza men, they are now in Hell, paying for their crimes. I will now leave you with Jennifer. Please heed my words

and do not contact the local police about her. Make sure that she is escorted back to her home in Canada.”

John looked next at Jennifer with fondness.

“I wish you a happy life from now on, little angel. Goodbye!”

John then disappeared from the spot he stood on, leaving a deeply shaken Nichols with a now crying Jennifer.

“Goodbye, great Ojizo-sama! I will always revere and remember you.”

CHAPTER 4 – MOUNT FUJI

11:03 (Japan Time)

Friday, December 21, 1973

Kawaguchiko Train Station

Twelve miles north of Mount Fuji (southwest of Tokyo)

Japan

Patricia, followed closely by John and with her arms loaded with luggage, stepped out of the train that had brought them from Tokyo, prompting the nearest Japanese porter to converge on her with his chariot.

“By the Nine Hells!” She exclaimed in Draconic to John. “With all this fine, sexy and exotic lingerie I bought around Shinjuku, I’m going to have to pay a fortune in U.S. Customs import duties when we go back to Los Angeles.”

“It still will be less expensive than paying for the gas to run your gas-guzzling Pontiac Firebird Trans-Am.” Replied sneakily John, making Patricia grumble: the OPEC oil embargo was now being fully felt in the United States, with prices at the pump rising constantly and with pumps being often empty, resulting in long lineups at the stations that still had gas.

“I still love my car: it helps attract more boys to me.”

“Is it really your car that attracts them, or your boobs?”

Patricia pulled her tongue out at John before putting down her suitcases and bags on the chariot brought forward by the station’s porter. They then made their way to the taxi stands, where they took a cab to go to the Fuji Lake Hotel, situated nearby on the shores of the splendid Lake Kawagushi, within full view of the majestic Mount Fuji, one of Japan’s three holy mountains and the object of pilgrimage for centuries.

Having reserved in advance a Western-style room at the Fuji Lake Hotel, the couple was able to quickly install itself in a room of the 1930s era establishment. To John’s satisfaction, their room faced directly Mount Fuji, with its snow-capped slopes and summit. Going to the balcony, John stared with melancholy at the volcano.

"Every time that I look at Mount Fuji, it awakens old souvenirs in me, very old souvenirs, Patricia. It was in fact my secret home for centuries, until the early 18th Century, when it last erupted and destroyed my cave. That was also when I lost my mate, Kannon⁵. She was killed in the eruption, or so I presume: I was away at the time and, when I returned, I found the entrance to our cave blocked by freshly solidified lava. For days, I desperately hoped that she had been able to make it out intact, but I never saw her afterwards, nor did she answer my telepathic calls."

Seeing tears appearing in John's eyes, Patricia approached him and gently put one hand on his right shoulder.

"I am sorry for your loss, John, truly. Is there any chance that there could be a way to get to your old cave?"

"I...I tried to find one many times over the centuries, but was unsuccessful. The nearest I could get to it was by the old Fuji-ko shrine in the Hitoana Cave, which is situated in the Aokigahara Forest, on the northwest slope of Mount Fuji, but I could go no further."

Patricia patted John's shoulder in encouragement as he lowered his head in sadness.

"Well, maybe I could help you with that, John. I have a few magical powers that could allow me to get to your cave."

Those words made John's head snap back up as he looked at her with renewed hope.

"You do? What powers do you have exactly?"

"I can teleport precisely where I want to, as long as I have a good idea of where I am going. I also can turn into ethereal form and be able to walk through solid walls or obstructions. If you want, we could go together to that Hitoana Cave when you will feel like it."

"Tonight, maybe?" Said John, crazy hopes rising in his mind. Patricia nodded her head once at that.

"Tonight will be fine, John."

His response was to hug her with joyful strength.

"Thank you, Patricia, from the bottom of my heart. You are a real friend. I will owe you, big time!"

"I will take some sex as a payment, later on." She replied with malice.

⁵ Kannon : Japanese pronunciation of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. She is one of the most beloved Buddhist divinity.

16:02 (Japan Time)

Starting point of the trail to the Hitoana Cave

Northeast limit of the Aokigahara Forest

Mount Fuji slopes

The driver of the taxi that had carried Patricia and John to the point where the trail to the Hitoana Cave started looked with concern at the couple through the opened window of his car.

"It is going to be dark soon. Are you sure that you want to go to the cave at this hour, sir? They say that the place is haunted."

"Don't worry about us, good man." Replied John casually. "I have been here many times before and know the forest well. We will walk back: the fresh air will do us good."

Only half convinced, the taxi driver nonetheless made his car turn around and sped away, leaving Patricia and John alone at the forest's edge. Both wore Winter coats and hiking boots, while Patricia carried a Nikon 35mm camera in its protective leather case hanging from her neck by a leather strap.

"So, shall we get on our way?" Asked John.

"Yes! Show the way! By the way, is it true that this forest is haunted?"

"It certainly has the reputation for it, Patricia. In the past, poor families came here to abandon very young or very old members who were not wanted or were considered a burden. More recently, the Aokigahara Forest has become a favorite place for those who wanted to commit suicide. In fact, this forest is the second most popular suicide location in the World after the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco."

"Wow! I can see why the locals would think of this place as being haunted."

"Do you believe in ghosts, Patricia?"

"I do, as I met a few ones in the past, mostly around cemeteries in France. Most of the old superstitions about ghosts are wrong, but they are basically souls who cannot find peace for some reason or another. They are mostly harmless and are invisible to people who can't perceive magic, but they sometimes appear to the living and scare the hell out of them."

"Can you see them?"

"Yes! One of my innate magical abilities as a Succubus is 'True Seeing', which allow me to see beings in ethereal form, among other things. I myself can transform temporarily into ethereal form."

"Decidedly, your magical abilities are definitely superior to mine, Patricia."

"And that's normal, John: I am an Outsider, a being from another plane of existence who was shaped by magic, while you are an extra-terrestrial being with magical talents. Mind you, your fire breath is one mighty weapon, I will give you that."

The couple mostly stayed silent as it walked up the long trail of stone steps towards the Hitoana Cave. They arrived there after maybe twenty minutes of walking, by which time the Sun was about to set. The couple paused at the entrance to the grounds of the ancient shrine, a small deforested area nearly filled with rows of simple stone monuments reminiscent of gravestones. John let Patricia look around for a moment before pointing at the bigger central monument.

"This is the Hitoama Asama Shrine, dedicated to the resident divinity of Mount Fuji. The cave entrance you see under and in front of it is the cave I spoke to you about. It leads to an ancient shrine at the end of the cave, some 300 feet deep. Shall we go in now?"

"Wait! Let me check out our surroundings first."

"You mean, watch for ghosts?"

"And other things." Said Patricia, dead serious. Uttering a 'True Seeing' spell, she nearly recoiled at once with both surprise and alarm, making John stiffen.

"What? What do you see?"

"Ghosts! Hundreds of ghosts! They are all around us, watching us. However, they don't seem to be making any hostile gestures...for the moment."

Patricia then paused as she examined more carefully the half-translucent shapes floating close to the ground around her and John. The majority of the shapes were tiny, the size of mere children or even babies, while a strong minority of the other shapes looked like old people. All looked at the couple with sadness or despair on their faces. Patricia then remembered what John had said to her about unwanted young children and old people having been abandoned in this forest. She felt nearly overwhelming emotions as she remembered the time when she had herself been abandoned by her mother, Lilith, in a narrow, dark back alley of Paris in 1932. Lilith had done so to save her from the other demons in the Abyss who wanted to kill Delicia, whom they

considered as an abomination because of the Celestial blood in her veins. Still, that abandonment had strongly marked Delicia's psyche. Thankfully, she had been promptly found, sheltered and then adopted by a French woman with a truly golden heart. The sight of the tiny shapes and the memory of her dead adoptive mother brought tears to Patricia's eyes.

"So many children here, all abandoned to die in this forest. I even see babies, dozens of them."

Deeply shaken, although he could not see the ghosts himself, John spoke softly to Patricia, careful not to sound hostile towards them.

"What are they doing?"

"Right now: nothing! They are simply watching us. I will try to communicate with them telepathically."

Patricia then concentrated, her eyes fixing one of the older-looking shapes, that of a decrepit woman who held two of the young ghosts by the hand.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes! Who are you? How come you can communicate with us? Nobody we saw here before could."

"I am myself not from this plane of existence. How long have you been here?"

"For me, centuries! I was abandoned here when my family, which was very poor, could not feed me anymore. Somehow, I never went to Heaven, or even Hell, after I died. Instead, I found myself stuck here for eternity, like all the poor souls you see around."

"But, all those children, they had to be completely innocent souls. Why are they stuck here, instead of being in the Celestial Plane?"

"Probably because they never felt the love that they rightly expected from their parents, or because they felt bitter at being abandoned. Each of us have separate reasons for being stuck here."

Patricia felt fresh tears on her face: the feeling of sadness and despair permeating the shrine grounds was almost overwhelming. Looking at John, she spoke to him in a shaking voice, near sobbing.

"We...we have to do something for all those poor souls. This can't go on forever!"

"But, what can we do?"

"I...I don't know! Let me think a bit."

Reviewing all the possibilities in her mind, Patricia had to conclude that she by herself could not do more for the ghosts than offer them some gentle words. As for John, he was obviously even less able to help in this situation. In truth, only a deity or something close to it would have the power to help all those lost souls. The word 'deity' then triggered a thought in her mind. However, that thought was also a very scary one for her. Another look around at the hundreds of children's' souls watching her finally convinced her.

"John, I am going to attempt something, something that could potentially bring death to me. Whatever happens, please don't react and stay aside."

"What do you mean? What are you going to do, Patricia?"

Patricia didn't answer him, instead concentrating in conjuring one of her most powerful spells.

'Celestial Hound Archon, I implore and summon thee for your help to save innocent souls.'

Nearly at once, a humanoid shape appeared out of nowhere, materializing a few paces in front of her. It had a canine-like head, a muscular body and wide shoulders. The being seemed disoriented at first, as if it was confused by its new surrounding. It quickly enough glared at Patricia and started to take out of its scabbard the long sword it carried across its back.

"HOW DARE YOU SUMMON ME? YOU ARE A DEMON! DO YOU WANT TO DIE?"

"Please calm down and hear me out." Said softly Patricia, hiding her fear as best she could. Even though she most probably could defeat this Hound Archon in a fair fight, more Celestials would then probably follow, some even more powerful than her. Somehow, her tone convinced the Celestial not to strike her down right away, although he did completely draw his sword out.

"SPEAK!"

"Thank you! First, yes, I am a demon, a Succubus to be more exact. I summoned you in order to get help for all the little innocent souls you see around this hallowed ground, trapped for eternity on the Material Plane. Could you get help in order to bring all those children's souls up to the Celestial Plane, where they rightly belong?" The Hound Archon looked around at the hundreds of ghostly shapes, then back at Patricia.

"And why do you wish that? I never saw demons show pity or concern for others before."

Patricia took a deep breath before answering.

"Because I have some Celestial blood in my veins. Now, will you help those innocent souls or not?"

"I don't have the kind of power needed to free those souls from their burdens. I will have to get someone a lot more powerful than me, demon."

"Then, go!"

The Hound Archon disappeared at those two last words, making John Hideyoshi blow air out in relief.

"You summoned a Celestial to get help for those ghosts? You are either braver or crazier than I..."

His sentence was cut short by the sudden apparition of a nine foot-tall humanoid with a bald head, golden skin, brilliant topaz eyes in a most handsome face and huge white feathery wings. It had a greatsword in its hands and stared hard at Patricia as he spoke in a deep, booming voice.

"YOU ARE A BRAVE AND UNUSUAL DEMON INDEED. YOU ALSO HAVE QUITE A POWERFUL MAGICAL AURA. WHO ARE YOU EXACTLY?"

Bracing herself as she faced the Solar, one of the most powerful of Celestials, Patricia spoke as calmly as she could.

"Who I am is not important now. What is important is to save all the innocent souls that you see around that are presently trapped here for eternity. I am asking for your help to break their bonds to the Material Plane and to bring them to the Celestial Plane, where they rightly belong."

As the Solar scanned the area of the shrine and eyed the hundreds of small ghostly shapes, Patricia thought that she saw for a moment a glimpse of pity and sadness in the Celestial's eyes. The Solar then looked back at her, this time in a noticeably softer way.

"I NEED TO KNOW YOUR MOTIVES TO ACT THE WAY YOU DID. WHY DO YOU CARE FOR THOSE SOULS?"

"Out of simple goodness, believe it or not. I myself was abandoned by my mother on the Material Plane when I was only five years old. Before you curse her for supposedly being heartless, know that she did that to save me from all the demons who wanted to kill me in the Abyss, for I was an abomination in their eyes. My mother is a

Succubus, but my father was a fallen archangel named Gideon. He died covering my mother's retreat as she jumped to the Material Plane with me."

The Solar reacted to that by slowly lowering his greatsword, planting its tip in the ground in front of him and resting both hands on its pommel while staring at Patricia.

"I KNEW GIDEON. HE FELL FROM GRACE ONLY A FEW DECADES AGO. SO, THIS WOULD MAKE YOU A HYBRID DEMON-CELESTIAL. INTERESTING! THAT WOULD TEND TO EXPLAIN YOUR POWERFUL AURA. YET, YOUR MOTHER HERSELF SHOULD HAVE BEEN OF HIGH DEMON LINEAGE FOR YOU TO HAVE INHERITED SO MUCH POTENTIAL POWER."

"My mother is the great Lilith. You should know about her: she gave the royal finger to your God eons ago."

Instead of becoming angry then, the Solar smiled with amusement at Patricia.

"QUITE SPUNKY, ARE WE? YES, I KNOW YOUR LILITH. GOD ALSO REMEMBERS HER VERY WELL. AS FOR GIDEON, HE ALSO HAD QUITE A STRONG CHARACTER, ALTHOUGH HE PROVED TO BE MISGUIDED IN THE END."

"HE SIMPLY SHOWED FREE WILL!" Replied Patricia forcefully before lowering her voice. "I am proud of being his daughter."

"AND HOW MAY I CALL THE DAUGHTER OF LILITH AND GIDEON?"

"Delicia is my name and sin is my game. Now, are you finally going to get off your buns and help all those little souls?"

The Solar gave a warning look at Patricia before facing the crowd of ghosts and raising both hands up. He then sang a long incantation in Celestial, an incantation that actually sent some painful vibrations through Patricia's body: the demonic part of her apparently didn't like the Celestial words very much. As the Solar finished his incantation, Patricia saw with growing joy the shapes of the child ghosts starting to detach themselves by the dozens from the ground and climb towards the sky. After less than a minute, all the ghosts had flown up skyward. When Patricia turned to face the Solar again, tears of joy in her eyes and on her cheeks, it was to see that he had been watching her reaction to the unbinding of the souls. The face of the mighty Celestial was most sober now as he stared at her.

"SO, YOUR MOTIVES AND YOUR COMPASSION WERE REAL, DELICIA. IT IS A WONDERFUL SURPRISE FOR ME TO SEE SUCH EMOTIONS IN A DEMON. THERE IS HOPE FOR YOU YET."

"Hope for what? For me to go to the Celestial Plane? Forget it: the parties there suck! Oh, I forgot: they don't hold real parties up there. If you meant hope to see me do more good in my twisted demonic ways here on the Material Plane, then I accept the compliment. And thank you for helping all those souls. By the way, how should I call you?"

The Solar made a big grin as he bent forward towards her, putting one big hand on top of her left shoulder.

"URIEL IS MY NAME AND REPENTANCE IS MY GAME! GOODBYE, SPUNKY DELICIA! DON'T WISH TO SEE ME AGAIN, AS IT WOULD THEN PROBABLY BE THE DAY YOU DIE."

The Solar then disappeared in an instant, leaving a hugely relieved Patricia alone with John in the middle of the hallowed ground. John nearly ran to her before happily hugging her.

"Patricia, what you just did was both fantastic and most courageous. All those poor souls will now be able to rest in peace. I will owe you big for this."

Gently taking John's head with both hands, she made him look at her and smiled to him.

"What you owe me is two lick jobs and a good fuck, my dear John. Now, I believe that we came here to find a way to your old cave."

"Right! Follow me!"

With both Patricia and John possessing the power of 'Dark Vision', the couple didn't need to light a flashlight or torch before entering the mouth of the cave situated under the central stone shrine. Being an official Japanese natural monument, the cave had been adapted for the needs of tourists and visitors, with a central walking trail carved in the black volcanic rock and with a handrail running along the tunnel that followed the cave's entrance grotto. There were also overhead electrical lamps, but those had been switched off in the late afternoon, before the couple's arrival. Walking slowly down the dark tunnel, John and Patricia covered a hundred yards before seeing the end of the tunnel. There, the tunnel split in two, with a small, shallow cavity situated above a much larger cavity where a Buddhist shrine had been built. The shrine was made of crudely cut wood planks and contained a single, badly eroded stone statue. The whole thing appeared very old and, in this deep, surreal dark tunnel, had to have a strong effect on the common visitor. John contemplated the shrine in silence for a moment before speaking up.

"This is the farthest I was able to go during my previous visits. It is now up to you and your magic, Patricia."

She didn't reply at first, walking slowly around the shrine to go inspect the rock face behind it. The tunnel actually split in two there, but both tunnels went only a few yards further while quickly shrinking in size, to end in rock faces formed by solidified volcanic lava.

"How far from your old cave do you estimate that we actually are, John?"

"A good three miles at the least. Originally, this tunnel went all the way to my cave, where it opened up. However, the 1707 eruption both crumbled most of the tunnel and filled it with lava. I don't even know if my cave still exists: it could well have been filled with lava then, in which case there would be nothing for me to return to."

Feeling his discouragement, Patricia patted John's shoulder in encouragement.

"Everything is not lost yet, John. Now, I will need to telepathically explore your ancient memories about your cave. I need to have a good visual picture of it, along with its approximate location, before attempting to teleport to it."

"I'm all yours, Patricia."

"Good!" She replied with a malicious grin. "That's the way I like you. Hold still, please and start thinking about your old cave."

Approaching John, Patricia put her forehead against his and closed her eyes before concentrating on opening a mental link to his memories. She stayed motionless like this for a good two minutes before opening her eyes and stepping back.

"I am now ready to go."

"What if my old cave is filled with solidified lava? Could you be in danger of staying stuck there?"

"No! If your cave doesn't exist anymore, then my teleport attempt will simply bounce and I will reappear here nearly instantly. If I don't reappear at once, then it will mean that I found some kind of free space deep inside Mount Fuji."

"Then, I can only wish you good luck, Patricia."

"Luck is for losers." She replied with a grin just before disappearing from the spot where she had stood. His heart now beating furiously, John waited to see if she would return at once after bouncing on rock. His hopes then grew dramatically as seconds, then minutes, passed without a sign back from Patricia.

"By my ancestors! Please make her find my old cave."

16:51 (Japan Time)

Underground cave, Mount Fuji

As soon as she rematerialized, Patricia anxiously looked around her in the pitch darkness surrounding her, trying to figure out where she was. It was quickly evident to her that she was not near the underground shrine anymore, as she could now see that she was in a vast cave. She however could not see all of the cave, as it was larger than the range of what her natural dark vision allowed her to see in the blackness. She thus walked towards her left until she met one of the walls of the cave. She however had to go cautiously, as part of the ceiling had crumbled a long time ago, covering the floor with boulders and rubble and making walking treacherous. Touching a boulder lying near the wall she had approached, she cast a 'Light' spell on it. The boulder immediately started to glow, shedding light in a twenty-foot radius around the boulder. Turning ninety degrees to her left, she walked for about fifty feet and cast 'Light' on another boulder. She repeated the same process another six times and ended up being able at last to see the whole of the cavern in normal light. It was big, measuring a good eighty yards by 150 yards, with a ceiling that had an original height of at least thirty yards. As she was examining the ceiling to see how solid or stable it was, Patricia felt her heart accelerate suddenly: the crumbling of part of the ceiling had made visible a reinforcing structure of metallic bars sunk into the rock. Without it, the whole ceiling would have caved in, instead of only the surface layer of rock cracking up and falling. What she had taken to be rock boulders and rubble was actually pieces of some kind of concrete. If anything, this was proof that she was now standing inside the ancient base of a technologically advanced alien civilization, rather than in the lair of a beast.

"Hell, John, I did find your cave after all."

She then decided to go get John before doing more exploring of the cave. Concentrating and picturing the image of the underground shrine in her mind, she teleported back to the tunnel, making John nearly jump from the surprise.

"Damn, Patricia, you scared me! So, where did you end up?"

"In your cave, I believe, unless caves with ceilings reinforced by metal bars are common around here."

John very nearly pushed a scream of joy, keeping it in at the last moment. Instead, he kissed Patricia on her cheeks.

"Patricia, you're fantastic! Can you transport me there?"

Her response was to grab him by the waist and glue him next to her just before teleporting. When they reappeared in the big cave, John had to sit on a nearby boulder, so strong were the emotions he now felt as he looked around him.

"My old base, at last!"

As John went over his emotions, Patricia walked towards what looked like a mound of rubble and chunks of concrete, situated near one extremity of the cave. As she got closer to the mound, she started noticing some curious details and she slowed down her pace as she examined it more carefully. Revelation then hit her like a sledgehammer as she stopped near one end of the mound.

"Er...John, you better come here, quickly!"

Intrigued by her tone of voice, John came to her at once while being careful not to twist an ankle on the pieces of rubble. He then became thunderstruck when he was able to see what Patricia was looking at.

"Kannon!... My poor Kannon!"

He then collapsed on his knees, raked by sobs. Wanting to respect her friend's grief, Patricia slowly backed away from the skeletal head of the dragon and discreetly examined the rest of the remains, which were nearly completely covered up by rubble and big chunks of concrete. John's mate had obviously been killed when large pieces of concrete falling from the ceiling had smashed her head. The general position and posture of the dragon's corpse then made Patricia wonder about it and she got closer still from the mummified body. Using all her senses, including magic detection, she soon saw something that prompted her to frantically start removing the rubble covering one side of the dead dragon's belly.

"JOHN, I FOUND SOMETHING!"

The sight of her uncovering part of his long-dead mate angered John at first. It however took him only a second to understand that she did not mean to desecrate Kannon's remains. Getting up on his feet, he quickly joined her near the belly of the corpse.

"What is it, Patricia?"

"I can sense life under this rubble, right under the belly of your mate."

"Life? How could that be possible?"

A thought then struck his mind, making him join up Patricia in her digging. The two of them soon uncovered the whole belly area of the corpse. What they saw under the belly made John's eyes open wide.

"Eggs! Two eggs! Kannon was probably trying to protect them from falling debris when she was struck and killed. They look intact!"

"And I can sense life inside both of them." Said Patricia, measuring the full importance of their find. You obviously would know better than me what to do now, John, so how should we proceed with those eggs?"

"Let me do this, Patricia." Replied John, gently pushing her aside before kneeling next to the eggs, his body pushing away the mummified belly that had covered the eggs for so many centuries. Very cautiously grabbing one of the eggs with both arms, he delicately lifted it from its nest and twisted his torso, then put down the egg on the floor.

"Hold it so that it won't roll or tip over, Patricia."

"Got it!" Replied Patricia before putting her hands on top of the three-foot diameter brown egg. Its shell actually had a rough texture, unlike the polished texture of chicken eggs and it was quite heavy, proof that it was still full. John soon put the second egg next to the first, then joined Patricia in examining them.

"I...I can't believe that they survived for so long here without either hatching or dying."

"The how is not important, John. What is important is that your old mate left you two living offsprings."

"You are too right about that! By Drokos, this could completely change my life from now on! I now have two little ones to care for."

They were both silent for a moment, until Patricia spoke again.

"I suggest that we use some chunks to stabilize those eggs in vertical position, so that we would be free to see what else we could find in this cave."

"A good idea, actually. I am anxious to see how much of my old equipment survived that eruption."

After ensuring that the two precious dragon eggs wouldn't roll around, John led Patricia in a detailed search of the cave. While the dragon-sized furniture, now mostly rotten or in pieces, had fared badly the passage of time, what they found in a number of adjacent rooms carved out of the rock proved to be generally in better shape, albeit covered with dust. The largest of the connecting rooms was actually filled with alien machinery, all of it silent and dark.

"The life support systems section." Explained John as he entered the big secondary cave with Patricia. "Power is off, which is not too surprising in view of the time and lack of maintenance."

"Where you qualified technically to maintain all this, John?"

The bar owner nodded his head soberly.

"I was what you would call today an engineer. However, I have been cut off from all this for centuries now and everything I learned then has somewhat faded in my memory. I am not sure that I could still do the job properly today. Also, bear in mind that, in my society, many things that Humans do here using machines and tools were done by us via the use of magic. My people was what you would call master magicians, thus concentrated its technological knowhow on things that magic couldn't do, like long-range transportation and communications, space travel and data processing. Let's see what is still functional now... Hum, the geothermal power core is not responding and appears completely dead. The ventilation system seems intact on the whole but has no power to operate. I also suspect that the ventilation shafts of the base have been obstructed or filled with lava during the 1707 eruption. The air is stale in the cave... The water pumping and filtration system is definitely out: a big chunk of falling concrete smashed the unit to bits. Let's go next to the command room."

Walking out of the life support systems cave, the duo went to a much smaller cave close to it. Still big by human standards, it must have been considered fairly small by dragon standards and contained two huge separate electronic consoles and what looked like a big metal cylinder. John frowned when he saw that big chunks of concrete had fallen on the consoles and the cylinder, damaging them. The console on the left was actually split open by an angular boulder to which was still attached a few reinforcing metal rods.

"Damn! The long-range communications unit is a goner. It allowed us to communicate around the planet and also with ships passing through the Solar System."

That last sentence made Patricia look sharply at her friend.

"Dragon ships come frequently to the Solar System?"

"Not by human standards, sorry! In the twelve centuries I have been living on this planet, only one ship passed nearby, checking on us after my original ship dropped my parents off and continued on its mission, heading to another star system."

"And may I ask what was the mission of your ship, John?"

"Simply said, to seed habitable worlds by dropping off a mated pair of our kind on each suitable world found. The task of that pair of mates was then to multiply and, to a

lesser degree, help guide whatever sentient race there could be on their world towards enlightenment. I and Kannon are the descendants of the original pair of dragons dropped on Earth, who were known in Japan as the deities Amaterasu and Susano. Unfortunately, circumstances and luck proved to be unfavorable to us here on Earth and a number of young dragons died during the centuries. Me and Kannon were actually the last dragons on Earth in 1707, when Mount Fuji erupted and caused all this damage. But now, thanks to you, I have two hatchlings who will be able to perpetuate my race on Earth. For that, I will never be able to thank you enough.”

John then put a tender kiss on Patricia’s lips before looking warmly at her.

“Would you help me raise and protect those two hatchlings, Patricia, as my new long-term mate?”

“I would be honored to, John.” She replied soberly, very much conscious of the kind of responsibility she had just accepted to take on. “However, that leaves us with one problem concerning them: how the hell do we bring them back to Los Angeles? It is not as if we could have them put on our return plane as checked baggage. I could also see the response of U.S. Customs officials to them: ‘No sir, you are not allowed to bring agricultural products in the United States’.”

John giggled briefly at Patricia’s joke before becoming serious again.

“With luck, we may have a solution for that problem here, in this cave. But first, let me check something here. Please step back for a moment.”

As soon as Patricia was out of the way, John started to morph, growing quickly in size. After a few seconds, the bar owner had changed into a gigantic golden dragon. However, contrary to popular stories and fables, there was nothing fierce or repulsive in his new appearance. Rather than the usual bat-like wings of fables, this dragon had large wings covered with feather-like, thin golden scales, while his elongated head and muzzle, situated at the end of a long neck, also covered with golden scales, had smooth lines and a noble appearance. Its tail was proportionally short and both of its two forward legs could also serve as arms, with agile, six-digit fingers ending in claws, something John demonstrated then by sitting back on his rear legs before opening a drawer in one of the consoles and searching in it. He finally took out of the drawer four large, polished black gems, each suspended from long, beautifully crafted gold chains. Staying in dragon form for the moment, he kept three of the gems and gave the last one to Patricia.

"Take this jewel and wear it around your neck, Patricia: it is actually a personal communications device and works via telepathy. Thus, only me, you and other telepaths can use it or even figure out its use. The chain is fitted with two separate sets of clips, so that it could be worn by either a human-sized or dragon-sized being. To activate it, just touch it with two fingers and think your message. It is powered by your personal aura and can thus function indefinitely."

"How far can it send a message?"

"Its range is global and can even reach the Moon, if you ever go there of course. Now that you will help me with the two hatchlings, this will help us stay in contact at any time. One more thing about it: if anyone tries to forcibly take it from your neck, it will then send a powerful neuronal shock to your attacker's brain, knocking him or her down."

"I love it already. It is actually a beautiful jewel. Thank you, John!"

"Well, now that this is done, let's go to the next cave."

What they found in the adjacent cave seemingly discouraged John. That cave, which was quite large, contained what looked like two big metallic eggs, each about ten feet in diameter and height and resting on metallic legs. The top half of the eggs was transparent and showed two sorts of seats located on opposite sides of a central housing. However, parts of the ceiling had also crumbled in this cave, crushing one of the 'eggs'. John stared bitterly for a moment at the destroyed machine, then went to examine the second machine. It had received a glancing blow from a falling piece of rubble but that blow had only created a long crack on one side of the transparent dome topping the machine.

"Well, this gravity craft may not be fit anymore for space travel but, with luck, it could still be able to fly. Let me examine it for a few moments, Patricia."

As the dragon gathered a few human-sized tools and instruments from a tool bench on one side of the cave, Patricia looked up at the ceiling, searching for an exit meant to let the craft fly out. She nearly immediately saw a large, twenty-foot diameter hole in the ceiling, but rubble had fallen down from the vertical shaft and had piled up, nearly blocking it.

"From the looks of it, John, even if your machine can still fly, you may not be able to fly it out of here. I suspect that the exit shaft is blocked."

"I have something to take care of that problem...if it still works, that is." Replied the dragon as he was opening a hatch on one side of the nearly intact machine. He then morphed back into the human shape of John Hideyoshi before entering the machine with his tools and instruments. Being out of her depth technologically in this case, Patricia patiently waited, going slowly around the cave containing the two machines and looking at the various things in it while John worked inside the intact craft.

John pushed a triumphant shout after maybe four minutes, as lights appeared inside the egg-shaped craft.

"IT'S WORKING! NOW, IF WE CAN TAKE IT OUT OF THIS CAVE, WE WILL HAVE A WAY TO CARRY THE HATCHLINGS BACK TO LOS ANGELES."

"And how do you propose to reopen that exit shaft, John? I couldn't feel a single draft of wind coming out of it, which means that it is most probably obstructed by debris or solidified lava."

"We had digging machines that we used nearly three millenniums ago to enlarge and carve out this base. If they still work, then we will make quick work of those obstructions."

"THREE MILLENIUMS AGO? And you expect these machines to be still functional, John?"

John gave her a disarming smile as he stepped out of the flying craft he had just examined.

"Well, this craft is still working, no? Our machines were made to be long-lived, like me and my brethren. We also produced our machines and tools in two sizes: dragon-size and human-size. I will get human-sized disintegrator diggers."

"Uh, did you say 'disintegrator diggers'?"

"Yup!" Replied John as he went to a row of human-sized equipment lockers and opened one, taking out something that looked like a metal backpack with shoulder harnesses and with a large projector-like object on its front. John put on the harness, ending with the projector thing resting against its chest. Patricia could now see a number of controls and buttons fitted to two handles meant to orient the projector by up to a few degrees around a frontal arc. John pushed a button and a whining noise, like a turbine starting to spin, started being heard. He then approached the pile of rubble that nearly blocked the ceiling's exit opening, speaking to Patricia as he went.

"This digging device works by disintegrating large surfaces of materiel, be it rock or metal. With it, we could create a brand new exit tunnel in a couple of hours at the most. I will however concentrate on reopening the original exit shaft."

"You know what most Humans would do to get their hands on such a powerful device, John?"

"Oh, you don't need to remind me about the affinity of the Humans for war, Patricia. But you are right: most armies today would kill to get their hands on my disintegrator diggers. Be assured that I am not about to let them have any of my machines. Be careful: I am starting to dig now."

A two-foot-wide beam of intense blue light suddenly shot out of the projector carried by John, as a loud crackling sound also started. The energy beam however proved to be of limited length, which John apparently could adjust at will. Starting with the top of the rubble pile, John vaporized the whole pile in only half a minute of work, a feat that impressed Patricia to no little degree.

"Wow! This thing is really powerful! But how are you going to dig out the shaft now? You would need to have something to lift you up the shaft."

"I have it!" Replied a smiling John just before starting to float upward silently. "This digging harness also includes a directed gravity propulsion unit which permits me to fly around while digging. Wait here: I shouldn't be too long."

"Directed gravity propulsion, disintegrating digger, telepathic communications device..." Muttered Patricia to herself. "And I was taking John to be a simple bar owner all that time."

After about ten minutes of digging work up the shaft, John flew back down slowly, emerging from the shaft opening and landing softly on the floor of the cave."

"Job done! The original opening of the flying out tunnel is now free of debris."

"YES! I actually started feeling a slight breeze coming down from the shaft. That digging device really works fast."

"It does! Now, we only need to load the two eggs and a few other important things in this craft, then we will be on our way to Los Angeles."

"Uh, how fast is your machine, John? Are we going to spend half a day in the air?"

John smiled at her question.

"It is fast enough that even the missiles used by Humans won't be able to catch us. We will be in Los Angeles in about two hours. There, we will drop the eggs and my other stuff in the basement of my bar, then will return here to load more things. What is in this cave complex is too precious and too sensitive to risk seeing Humans get their hands on them."

"Why not leave them here? After all, the Humans have not been able to discover this cave for centuries."

"True, but Humans have proven way too adept in advancing their technologies and science during the last few decades. I don't give them more than a couple of decades before they will be able to detect this cave complex via remote sensors."

"Hum, you may be right. Let me give you a hand to load your things in that egg."

"That 'egg' is more properly called a directed gravity craft, Patricia." Gently corrected John, making Patricia smirk.

"Alright, let's load your things in the 'watchamacallit' machine."

"Patricia, you are truly incorrigible."

"I know! I am a demon, am I not?"

Apart from the two precious dragon eggs, John loaded an assortment of tools and instruments inside the intact craft, including the small-sized disintegrator digging device. He then sat, or rather laid down on the pilot's couch, a narrow but well padded bench inclined thirty degrees from the vertical and with a posterior rest. Once in position, his hands had easy access to the controls of an instrument panel attached to the couch.

"As you can see, Patricia, these two couches are made to fit either human shapes or dragons in shrunken size. Now, relax and enjoy the ride."

Activating a command, John made the craft lift slowly and silently off its skids, then made it float to a point just under the shaft's opening in the ceiling. Going up slowly and cautiously up the narrow shaft for about 200 yards, John then made the craft go forward and soon emerged in the blackness of the night on the slopes of Mount Fuji.

"We are now out of the ground. Hopefully, some tourist won't decide to explore the cave where the mouth of the shaft is during the time we will be on the way to and from Los Angeles."

Twisting her head and looking back, Patricia saw that they had emerged from a cave entrance half hidden by vegetation.

"Don't worry about that, John: I have a way to hide that entrance. WALL OF STONE!"

John's eyes widened when he saw a flat vertical stone wall appear just inside the mouth of the cave, blocking it entirely.

"Wow! Your magic is truly powerful, Patricia."

"As it should be, John. After all, I am the child of an arch-demon and of an archangel. Harold McMasters has also taught me many new things about magic during the last year and a half. Right now, I could probably stand up toe to toe to one of the demon princes of the Abyss in terms of magic."

John nodded his head slowly, preoccupation on his face.

"And that could attract the attention or envy of many who would want to use you to their profit, Patricia, either in the Abyss or on Earth."

"Well, they are welcomed to try...if they really want to die. Now, let's get on our way, shall we?"

"Yes Boss!" Jokingly replied John before making his craft jump upwards while accelerating quickly to hypersonic speed.

02:15 (California Time) / 19:15 (Japan Time)

**U.S.A.F. air defense control center, Vandenberg Air Force Base
California, U.S.A.**

The master sergeant manning one of the radar screens of the Vandenberg Air Force Air Defense Control Center felt his hair suddenly stand up on his head as an impossibly fast dot appeared on his screen, prompting him to shout urgently at the duty officer of the center.

"SIR, I HAVE A SINGLE HYPERSONIC OBJECT APPROACHING LOS ANGELES!"

The duty officer, an experienced Airforce major, nearly ran to his station and looked at the radar screen with growing alarm.

"Only a missile could go this fast. DOES ANYONE ELSE HAVE THIS CONTACT ON HIS SCREEN?"

"I DO, SIR! IT HAS BEEN DETECTED BY THE RADARS OF THE EDWARDS FLIGHT TEST CENTER. I READ ITS SPEED AS MACH SIX PLUS!"

"My God! We are under attack! Sergeant, record this track from now on. CAPTAIN SCHUMAKER, ALERT NORAD AND THE PENTAGON: MISSILE DETECTED PENETRATING OUR AIRSPACE AND HEADING FOR LOS ANGELES AT MACH SIX PLUS."

"RIGHT AWAY, SIR!"

"LIEUTENANT REED, ALERT MARCH AIR FORCE BASE! HAVE THEM SCRAMBLE THEIR INTERCEPTORS ON ALERT! LIEUTENANT WOLMACK, ACTIVATE OUR NIKE SURFACE-TO-AIR MISSILE BATTERIES!"

As his subordinates frantically got busy, the major anxiously followed the speedy dot on the radar screen: it was definitely heading for Los Angeles. He couldn't help close his eyes for a moment then as a wave of intense emotion washed over him: his grown son and his little family were living in Los Angeles.

"Please, God, don't let this happen."

Completely unaware of the panic they were creating, John and Patricia smiled on starting to see the lights of Los Angeles at night in the distance.

"You see? I told you that this craft was fast."

"And you didn't lie about that. With luck, we could complete two return trips and be back in Japan before the Sun rises there."

As John was making his craft decelerate while approaching the sprawling city, Patricia's acute vision caught on a dot of light in the distant sky: it was approaching their craft, fast!

"Hey, something is approaching us from our left! It is quite fast too."

John looked in that direction, only to feel his heart jump in his chest.

"IT'S A MISSILE! WE ARE BEING FIRED UPON! DAMN, I DON'T HAVE WEAPONS ON THIS CRAFT!"

Patricia muttered a curse between her clenched teeth: those Humans had decidedly been making way too much progress technologically during the past decades. However, she realized that she would have to do something, fast! Taking a decision, she touched the machinery cover in the center of the craft and muttered a quick spell before patting John's shoulder.

"This craft is now invisible and will be so for about ten minutes. Use that time to land your craft at the bar and unload it. I will join you there shortly."

"Wait! What are you going to do?"

"Play anti-missile defense, that's what!" She replied before vanishing from inside the craft.

Having teleported out of the craft, Patricia found herself freefalling through the cold air of the December night sky. Unfortunately for her, her present repertoire of spells didn't include 'Levitate' or 'Feather Fall'. Promising herself to correct that deficiency when she would have the time to do so, she then concentrated on the approaching missile and shouted in Abyssal.

"MAGIC MISSILES!"

Two tiny red dots shot out of her extended right hand and flew in an instant to the approaching missile, hitting it squarely. To Patricia's relief, the missile then exploded while still a hundred feet from her. Now that she had gotten rid of the most pressing threat, she quickly undid and removed both her shirt and her bra and rolled them into a tight ball that she held by one hand. Now topless, she morphed into her natural demonic form, making a pair of large, feathery black wings deploy in her back. Flapping her wings vigorously, she braked her fall in a few seconds, then started flying at medium altitude towards Los Angeles. She actually enjoyed that, as she had very few opportunities in the recent past to be in her natural form and to fly around.

"Aaah, I should do this more often."

In the Vandenberg air defense center, the major watched the missile disappear from the radar screen just as it was about to get to the intruder.

"SHIT! OUR MISSILE GOT SHOT DOWN! LIEUTENANT WOLMACK, FIRE ONE MISSILE FROM BATTERY 'DELTA'!"

"BUT, SIR, THOSE ARE ARMED WITH NUCLEAR WARHEADS! WE WILL INCINERATE PART OF LOS ANGELES IF WE FIRE ONE OF THEM."

"YOU PREFER TO SEE ALL OF LOS ANGELES DISAPPEAR IN A MUSHROOM CLOUD, MISTER?"

"MAJOR, THE OBJECT IS DECELERATING QUICKLY. IT IS NOW FLYING RIGHT OVER LOS ANGELES AT LOW ALTITUDE AND IS MANEUVERING."

"WHAT? DON'T TELL ME THAT THIS IS A MANNED PLANE."

"IT APPEARS SO, SIR."

"HELL! CONTACT THE INTERCEPTORS FROM MARCH AFB! VECTOR THEM TOWARDS THAT INTRUDER!"

"YES SIR!"

In the directed gravity craft, John let out a sigh of relief when he saw the incoming missile explode away from him. He also saw Patricia transform and start flying on her own after a few more seconds. Now reassured about her, he started decelerating his craft while going down, heading towards the Little Tokyo District. He was arriving within sight of the building containing his bar when two menacing shapes flew by him at high speed with a loud double 'WOOSH'. He frowned as he watched the two McDonnell-Douglas F-4 'Phantom' fighter-bombers perform wide turns to come back in his direction.

"Nice try, boys, but you are too late now."

John then started his final descent, soon being too low to be picked up further by the airborne radars of the F-4s. The fighter jets were still flying around, searching visually for his craft, when he landed smoothly on the flat roof of his building. Knowing that he had only a few minutes left before his craft became visible again, John hurried to take out the two dragon eggs and the other items brought from Japan, then ran to the roof trap giving access to the inside, unlocking the safety padlock on it and throwing the trap open. Grabbing one of the eggs, he cautiously went down the steep stairs to the upper floor and continued on until he was in the secret basement complex under his bar. Gently laying his dragon egg on top of a folded wool blanket, John then ran up to the bar, where he found the barman, Roman Radu, and the waitress, Priti Kumar, busy cleaning up things there.

"QUICK, COME WITH ME TO THE ROOF: I HAVE THINGS TO BRING TO THE BASEMENT!"

"Boss? But, we thought that you were on vacation in Japan?"

"I still am...officially. I will explain later but, now, I need your help."

"Coming, Boss!" Replied Roman, dropping his drying cloth on the bar counter, with Priti Kumar following close behind him. The three of them managed to take everything down to the basement rooms in only two trips, by which time Delicia was landing on the roof, still topless and in demonic form. John took a second to kiss her on her lips.

"Thanks for the timely help, Delicia. I thought for a moment that we were going to be toast up there."

"Indeed! Those Humans are really getting too good to my taste at inventing machines of war. Are all your things safely inside now?"

"Yes! We should now go back to Japan. Unfortunately, it is now too late to do a second return trip before the Sun will rise. We will have to wait another night to bring in the rest of my things."

Then turning to face Roman Radu, John gave him quickly a few short instructions.

"Roman, I will have to ask you to watch over the two large eggs I brought, and that until I come back from Japan. Just don't touch or move them in the meantime and don't let anyone else see or approach them."

"Uh, no problem, Boss. May I ask what those eggs are?"

"You may: they are dragon hatchlings...viable ones."

Both Roman and Priti opened their eyes wide at those words, with Priti then joyfully clapping her hands together.

"Oooh, we are going to have baby dragons here? That is fantastic!"

"Well, don't let the tiger in you devour my eggs, Priti." Said jokingly John as he was about to get back in his craft. "I should be back tomorrow night with more stuff. Roman, could you acquire in the meantime a few large canvas tarps, along with some aluminum modular tent frames and some sandbags to anchor them on the roof, so that we could hide this craft from direct sight?"

"No problem, Boss! I will take care of everything."

"Thanks, Roman! Thanks to you too, Priti! I will see you again tomorrow night."

With Delicia back into her human shape of Patricia Love and in her seat, John sat back inside his craft and closed the hatches, then took off in silence. By then, the two fighter jets had gone away, having probably given up on their elusive target.

02:31 (California Time)

Vandenberg Air Defense Control Center

Major General Albert Brown, having been awakened in a hurry from his small duty room, was reviewing grimly the tape recordings of the radar tracks showing the intruder that had just caused so much excitement.

"Too many different radars detected that intruder for this being simply a false echo. You reacted correctly, Major Lorentz."

"Thank you, sir!" Replied Lorentz, secretly relieved that his general was not going to blame him for overreacting. "The two interceptors from March AFB did pick up the intruder on their radars as well, at least at first, but then lost it in the ground clutter when it went down."

"In which area did it go down, Major?"

"Right in the downtown area, sir, around the Chinatown and Little Tokyo Districts."

"Hum! I will have the Air Force Police go have a look around there, both by car and by helicopter. If that thing landed inside Los Angeles, then we must find it, quickly!"

"SIR, I HAVE AGAIN THE INTRUDER ON OUR RADARS! IT IS NOW SPEEDING AWAY FROM LOS ANGELES AND ACCELERATING TO HYPERSONIC SPEED!"

Nearly running to the console of the radar operator who had just shouted his warning, Brown saw a dot flying quickly across the radar screen, coming from downtown Los Angeles and heading out to sea.

"Dammit! What could possibly go this fast? I am sure that the Soviets can't possess such a fantastic craft."

"Uh, maybe we should classify this incident under the standing U.F.O. file, sir." Suggested Major Lorentz, making Brown nod his head slowly.

"Do that, Major! Assemble all the data we have on this incident and be ready to brief NORAD on it in the afternoon."

"Yes sir!"

CHAPTER 5 – INTOLERANCE

20:37 (California Time)

Sunday, December 30, 1973

Patricia Love's home, Westwood District

Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.

Patricia was in a good mood when she arrived by taxi at her Westwood home and was able to drop her multiple bags in the main bedroom. The vacation in Japan had been both delightful and productive, for both her and John. While John was now proudly watching over two dragon eggs in his bar's basement, she had purchased in the Shinjuku Ward of Tokyo lots of exotic and very sexy lingerie and accessories that should allow her to renew and spice up Jennifer Woods' performances at the 'Pussycat Cabaret'. However, the purchase she was most proud of was a superbly crafted Katana sword, bought from an old sword-making master, which also came with a equally beautiful Wakizashi short sword and Tanto knife. Taking her new Katana out of its protective box, Patricia slowly pulled the blade out of its decorated scabbard and admired it for a moment. Her late father, Gideon the Archangel, had taught her at a very young age how to use a greatsword and even taught her the basics of the trade of weaponsmithing. Unfortunately, he had been killed before he could finish teaching her his knowledge about swords and their use. Despite of that, Patricia had kept an interest in blade weapons, practicing with various swords and sabers in her free time during her years in France and paying experts to give her occasional classes in sword fighting. With this Katana, she now had a weapon truly worthy of the name, a sword that she fully intended to impregnate eventually with magical powers. Then, avenging angels coming after her were going to regret tangling with her.

Taking the time first to undo her bags and put away her things, Patricia then decided to call a good friend, with ideas for some wild sex in her mind. Composing the number for Robert Purnell's apartment on her bedroom telephone, she was surprised to hear the telephone at the other end ring repeatedly, without getting an answer. She knew Purnell fairly well by now and knew that he typically was home on Sunday

evenings, in order to study a bit before attending his classes at the UCLA on Monday mornings. On the other hand, New Year was only two days away, so maybe Robert had gone to visit another friend. She thus composed next the telephone number of a mutual friend of theirs, another closet gay young man studying at the UCLA. This time, she got an answer after two rings.

"Hello? Who is it?"

"Jim? This is Sylvia! Are you okay? You sound weird."

"Sylvia? I tried to contact you repeatedly during the last five days, but you never answered."

"I was in Japan, on vacation, and just arrived home. Why were you trying to contact me? Is something wrong?"

Patricia then had the impression that Jim Walker was about to break down and cry.

"It...it is about Bob Purnell: he is in hospital, in a coma."

"WHAT? IN WHAT HOSPITAL? WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM?"

"He is at the Good Samaritan Hospital, on Wilshire Boulevard. Him and me had gone to a Christmas party at a club in Santa Monica, a party for gay men. The police burst inside the club halfway through the party and started arresting men left and right, accusing them of homosexuality and systematically beating people in the process. A cop started beating me with his truncheon and that enraged Bob, who then punched that cop senseless. Unfortunately, five more cops attacked Bob and beat him to a pulp, causing a severe commotion. These bastards then threw me, Bob and many others in jail, ignoring my pleas for medical attention for Bob for hours before someone finally called for an ambulance. By then, Bob had slipped into a coma. I was myself released a day later on bail and was then able to visit Bob at the Good Samaritan Hospital a number of times. He is still in a coma, but that has not stopped those cop pigs from handcuffing him to his hospital bed and from charging him with assaulting and wounding a police officer. Even if he comes out of his coma, he will still be in deep legal trouble and will most probably be publicly known as a homosexual, thus ending his football career with the Bruins."

Patricia/Delicia now felt anger and rage boiling up inside her. If there was anything that she loathed most, it was hypocrisy, the kind of hypocrisy that made so-called 'normal' people consider homosexuals as degenerates and deviants. Those same 'normal' people however didn't have much compunction about paying for the services of prostitutes or to look at pornographic pictures or movies, all in secret of course!

"Thank you for the information, Jim. I'm going to go visit Bob at the hospital right away. We will talk again tomorrow evening."

Patricia then put down the receiver and thought about all the possible things this could cause to Robert. Jim had been right to say that his reputation was probably going to be tarnished, even if he didn't go to jail. In today's macho culture of American university football, being known as a homosexual was a sure way to kill a sporting career. As for homosexuality itself, she knew that sodomy was still considered a criminal act in many states, although she wasn't sure about California. She would however have ample time to check on that later on, after having visited Robert. Concentrating for a moment, she morphed into the shape of Sylvia Thorne, but made a change to it, making her genitals female ones instead of the male ones which Robert had appreciated so much. If she could provide an alibi to Robert by declaring herself as his girlfriend, then maybe part of his legal troubles would disappear. Making sure first to change her identity papers in her purse to those in the name of Sylvia Thorne, she then called for a taxi to pick her up: there was no sense in being seen arriving at the hospital in a car registered in the name of a certain Patricia Love.

The Good Samaritan Hospital being fairly close to her Westwood home, Sylvia/Delicia arrived there by taxi less than fifteen minutes later. Leaving a generous tip to the happy driver, she nearly ran inside the reception lobby of the hospital and went to the female receptionist sitting behind a counter on one side of the lobby.

"Excuse me, miss, but I am here to see a patient named Robert Purnell. I just learned that he was admitted days ago, suffering from a commotion and being in a coma."

"I am sorry, miss, but visiting hours are over. You will have to come back tomorrow, between nine o'clock and..."

Getting pissed again, Delicia bent forward and spoke in a cold voice, at the same time that she threw a 'Suggestion' spell at her.

"Miss, my boyfriend is in a coma and may die at any time. Are you refusing me a chance to see him while he is still alive?"

"Uh, let me contact the intensive care unit and see what I can do, miss."

"Thank you!"

As she was waiting for the receptionist to do her call, Delicia noticed that another visitor, a man wearing a dark blue suit, was discreetly eyeing her while pretending to read a

newspaper he held in his hands. Now on her guards, she briefly saw the police badge hooked at the man's belt that became visible for a moment as his vest opened a bit when he crossed his legs. Delicia quickly understood what was the game here: the man was probably a detective from the L.A.P.D. Vice Squad, placed here to identify and catch any homosexual who would want to visit Robert Purnell. He was close enough from the reception counter to have heard Delicia say that she wanted to visit Purnell. Well, if that was the case, Delicia was certainly not going to go gently on that detective if he became too assertive or aggressive towards her: she had many ways to hurt or even kill that man and still make it look like an accident or sudden illness.

The receptionist finally looked back at Sylvia/Delicia at the end of her call.

"Miss, in view of the state of your friend, the doctor on duty on his floor will allow you to make a short visit. He is in Room 414, fourth floor."

"Thank you very much, miss."

Delicia didn't miss the fact that the police detective hurried to get into another elevator cabin as she called and entered a cabin to go to the fourth floor. Once up on the said floor, she quickly orientated herself and walked down a large corridor, eyeing the room numbers as she went. To her irritation, a policeman in uniform interposed himself when she tried to walk inside Robert's room.

"I am sorry, miss, but this patient is under police custody."

"And that gives you the right to deny him all visitors' privileges while he lays in a coma? You want me to sue you for abuse of power?"

With her powers to intimidate set at full, her threat made the policeman hesitate, then step aside. As she walked in and had her first look at Robert in his hospital bed, a doctor wearing a white coverall joined her in the room to speak to her in a near whisper.

"Miss, I am Doctor Franklin, the doctor on duty on this floor. I have been treating your friend since his arrival. He is in a deep coma and it would take little to make his body give up at this stage. I will urge you to not try to make him speak and not shake him up."

"I understand, Doctor." Replied Delicia, her voice nearly choking up on seeing the battered, swollen face of Robert. "Those bastards really beat him up badly, as I was told by another friend."

Franklin nodded his head once but did not reply to that. He himself had been incensed on seeing in what state that patient had been brought in, rather late on top of it, by the

police. His protestations on seeing Purnell being cuffed to his bed had been in vain, but he had still brought the matter all the way to the top levels of the hospital's administration. Unfortunately, the Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, Edward Davis, apparently intended to play hardball in this case.

"I will let you alone with him for a few minutes, miss. Again, please be careful not to disturb his sleep: his body needs to rest if it is going to recuperate at all."

Franklin then walked out of the room, leaving Sylvia/Delicia alone with Robert. Approaching slowly her friend, she contemplated with growing emotion and grief his battered head and face and the various tubes and monitoring wires connected to him. In the year and a half that she had known him, Robert Purnell had proved to be a gentle and kind young man with no meanness in him, despite his love for the rough sport of American football. He had also proved to be an intelligent and tolerant person of absolute honesty. His only negative point, if one considered it as such, was his homosexuality, which he had been forced to hide due to the intolerance shown these days in Los Angeles and in the rest of the United States. Tears started coming out of her eyes as she bent over and approached her face to his face and gently touched his temples with her hands.

"My poor Robert! What have these bastards done to you?"

As both of their faces nearly touched, Delicia was suddenly shocked to see her hands starting to glow lightly. She certainly knew what this meant, but she still couldn't believe her eyes: demons were not supposed to be able to have the power to cure wounds! Her surprise however turned quickly into resolve: not worrying any more about how this could be possible, she instead closed her eyes and concentrated while keeping her hands against his temples.

"Heal your brain, Robert! Come out of this coma!"

She stayed like this for a long moment, losing track of time. When she finally opened her eyes again, it was to see that Robert was now looking at her.

"S...Sylvia? Where am I?"

She then couldn't help kiss him on the lips, overjoyed, before answering him in a soft voice.

"You are at the Good Samaritan Hospital, Robert. You have been in a coma for five days. You however need to rest. Don't speak further and don't try to move: I will go get your doctor."

Walking quickly out of the room and passing by the policeman guarding it, Sylvia went to the nearby nursing station and addressed the senior nurse on duty there.

"Nurse, my friend in Room 414 just woke up from his coma. Please advise Doctor Franklin immediately."

The nurse froze in disbelief for a short instant, then recovered her wits and punched the button of her P.A. system.

"Doctor Franklin to Room 414! Doctor Franklin to Room 414, please. The patient has awakened."

The nurse then grabbed her stethoscope and headed for Robert's room at a quick pace, followed closely by Sylvia. The police detective that she had seen first in the lobby however cut her path while flashing his badge in her face.

"Los Angeles Police! I need to ask you a few questions, miss."

"Can't it wait, dammit? My friend just awoke from a coma."

"No, it cannot wait! Your friend assaulted a police officer and was at a gay party when arrested. Identify yourself!"

Making a show of looking furious, Sylvia fished her wallet from her purse and took out her driver's permit, showing it to the detective.

"Here! Satisfied? As for my friend being gay, you are sorely mistaken: I am his girlfriend."

"Right!" Replied the detective, clearly skeptical, before noting down her name and address in a notebook.

"Now, could you let me see my boyfriend?"

"Boyfriend my ass!" Said the detective, who then made a huge mistake: thinking that she was a transvestite man in disguise, he put his right hand under her short skirt to feel her genitals. Sylvia immediately recoiled in indignation while shouting out loud.

"DON'T TOUCH ME LIKE THIS, YOU PERVERT!"

Looking quickly around him, the detective paled when he saw that two nurses nearby had seen him touch her crotch and were now eyeing him with reprobation. Even the policeman on duty in front of Room 414 was looking at him crossly.

"I...you are mistaken, miss. I..."

"YOU TOUCHED MY GENITALS! THAT'S HOW YOU USE YOUR POLICE BADGE? TO FONDLE WOMEN?"

Doctor Franklin, who had also seen the detective's gesture from a distance, then interposed himself, looking severely at the police officer.

"I saw you reach with your hand under her skirt, mister. Show me your badge and police I.D. or I will call security."

"But, you don't understand! She is probably a transvestite coming to visit his homosexual boyfriend."

"BULLSHIT!" Replied Sylvia, playing the indignation card to the hilt. "I CAN PROVE EASILY ENOUGH TO THIS DOCTOR AND THOSE NURSES THAT I AM INDEED A WOMAN. THEN, I WILL HAVE CHARGES OF SEXUAL ASSAULT AGAINST ME AND FALSE ARREST AGAINST MY BOYFRIEND LAID AGAINST YOU AND YOUR DEPARTMENT AND I CAN GUARANTEE YOU THAT I KNOW A VERY GOOD LAWYER THAT WILL BREAK YOUR BADGE TO PIECES."

With Franklin and the nurses still eyeing him severely and one other nurse starting to call a security guard to their floor, the detective had no choice but to present nervously his badge and police I.D. card to the doctor.

"This is all a misunderstanding, Doctor, I assure you."

"Yeah, sure!" Said Franklin while noting down the name and badge number of the detective. Having himself been incensed by the extensive wounds inflicted on Robert Purnell during his arrest, and having protested his handcuffing to his bed, he had little sympathy or tolerance for the behavior of L.A.P.D. members when it came to this case. Next, he pointed at the senior nurse present.

"Nurse Mansfield, I want you to go examine in private this lady and establish as a fact that she is a woman. If so, I will personally pursue charges of sexual impropriety against this Detective Kyle Ross. In the meantime, I will go examine the patient in Room 414."

"Understood, Doctor! If you will please follow me, miss."

The police detective started sweating heavily as Sylvia disappeared with the senior nurse inside a female washroom. He paled even more when he saw the severe, disgusted look the nurse gave him on coming out of the washroom with Sylvia.

"She is without a doubt a woman, mister. Know that I will be happy to testify against you in front of a judge."

"I...I need to place a call to the police station."

"Sure you do, mister!" Replied the nurse in a sarcastic tone. As the devastated detective walked away, the nurse pointed to Sylvia a private security guard who was approaching at a near run.

"Don't worry any more about that bastard, miss: our own security guard will stay with you and ensure that he doesn't abuse you again while you wait for Doctor Franklin's diagnostic on your friend."

"Thank you, Nurse Mansfield. In truth, my only true concern now is for my friend."

The graying nurse nodded her head while smiling to her.

"And I assure you that we will take good care of him."

"Talking of care, if there are any problems about paying for his medical bills, I am more than ready to assume the costs of his hospital stay."

"That is most generous and considerate on your part, miss."

"That is what friends are for, no?"

"Indeed!" Said the nurse, obviously liking her. "Then, let's go to the nursing station. There, we will be able to take your contact information and, if you have one, your credit card information."

"Oh, I certainly have one, miss." Replied Sylvia, briefly searching in her purse and taking out a credit card, showing it to the nurse. Mansfield opened her eyes on seeing that it was the type of credit card reserved for those with very high spending limits.

"Oh! Without being indiscrete, may I ask what is your line of work, miss?"

"Professional modeling! However, I am much better known in Europe than here in the United States. I have tons of cash in banks, both here and in Europe."

"No doubt! Your card will be more than enough to cover the medical bills of your friend. Follow me to the nurses' station."

Sylvia was finishing to give her credit card information to the nurse when Doctor Franklin showed up, appearing a bit bewildered.

"I am happy to be able to tell you that your friend is now definitely out of his coma, miss. He however suffered a severe commotion and we will need to keep him here for a day or two at the least, in order to be sure that he doesn't suffer from other sequels."

"Thank God!" Said Sylvia/Delicia, barely keeping herself from invoking the Nine Hells instead. "Can I see him and speak to him now?"

"Yes, but no more than five minutes: he needs to rest."

"I promise that I will make it quick. Thanks, Doctor!"

She then nearly ran to Robert's room, where the policeman on guard duty judiciously decided to stand aside and not interfere with her. Looking at Robert with a loving smile, Sylvia slowly approached his bed as he watched her come closer, his eyes still foggy. Snuggling close to him, with her face inches from his face, she kissed him on the lips before speaking in a near whisper.

"Welcome back to the living, Robert. You really scared me."

"What happened to me? The last thing I remember is of fighting with a bunch of cops in that gay bar."

"Those bastards beat you up so badly that they put you into a coma. We are now on Sunday, December 30, and you just woke up from your coma. Now, listen very carefully to me: this is very important. The police has charged you with assaulting a number of police officers and with being an homosexual. I however intend to force them to drop the charges against you, but you will have to play the game with me."

"How do you propose to have those charges dropped, Sylvia?"

"By convincing them that you are not a homosexual. You will have to deny being a homosexual, and this even under oath. On my part, I will testify that I am your girlfriend, which should blow a hole in the accusations against you of homosexuality."

"But, they could have you examined, Sylvia. They will then see that you have a penis."

Sylvia shook her head slowly while smiling with malice.

"I already proved to a nurse here that I have a vagina, not a penis, so the police is going to look quite stupid if they insist on you being gay."

"A vagina? But, that's impossible! I bedded you often enough to know how you are made."

Her smile then faded and she stared him in the eyes. This could cost her dearly if Robert somehow didn't keep secret what she was going to tell him.

"Robert, I have a big secret to tell you. In exchange, I will ask you to never repeat it to anyone else and to never write it down. First, promise me that you will keep my secret, whatever it is or however shocking it may be to you."

"Alright, I will keep mum about your secret, but you don't make much sense right now, Sylvia. So, what is it?"

"I am a shape-shifting alien, Robert." Said matter-of-factly Sylvia, hiding the real truth under another lie. At least, being an alien was probably going to be less of a shock to Robert than to tell him that she was a demon from Hell. "I am able to morph my body

and appearance into either a man or a woman...or something in between. As for my presence here on Earth, it has no nefarious connotations to it, I assure you. My spaceship crashed into the ocean decades ago, stranding me on this planet with no hope of being able to call for help, ever. I thus had to use my shape-shifting powers in order to survive and adapt to life here. And, by the way, I am also very long-lived, so I will most probably outlast you by centuries, if I am not killed before. I say that so that you could understand that, while we can be good friends right now, you can't hope to marry me and live alongside me for more than a few years."

A big lump appeared in her throat when she saw his eyes fill with tears after she had said that they couldn't live together for long.

"Sylvia, you were always kind and loving towards me and I often wished that I could live with you for long years. I still do, even after your telling me that you are an alien. However, I understand and accept that it can't be so beyond a few years. Your secret will be safe with me. I will just ask you to let me love you as long as it is possible."

Those last words brought fresh tears to Sylvia's eyes and she then hugged him while kissing him repeatedly. She finally took back some distance and looked into his eyes.

"I will still love you as well, Robert. Now, you still have plenty of problems to face because of your arrest. Here is what we are going to do..."

Maybe ten minutes later, she walked out of Robert's hospital room, her mind troubled. Demons were not supposed to cry for others, nor were they truly capable of love, real love that is. Yet, she had cried for Robert and had felt deep distress and sadness at the sight of his pitiful appearance. Magical healing was also not a common skill among demons, who were much more inclined to use 'Inflict Wound' spells. Then, there had been that episode in the Aokigahara Forest in Japan, where she had taken pity on all those ghostly children and had risked calling a Celestial to get help for them. Was she a true demon after all, or was she a hybrid with some active Celestial blood in her, as Uriel the Archangel had suggested? Delicia felt that, somehow, she had just turned around in a significant way, a way that could be both wonderful and disastrous for her at the same time. Now, more than ever, she was going to have to be very cautious about her contacts with both the Abyss and the Celestial Plane, as too many demons and angels still viewed things solely in black and white, rather than in shades of gray.

15:39 (California Time)

Monday, December 31, 1973

Offices of the Vice Squad, L.A.P.D. headquarters

Parker Center, 150 North Los Angeles Street.

"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING, ROSS, TO PUT YOUR HAND UNDER HER SKIRT LIKE THAT IN FULL VIEW OF NURSES AND DOCTORS?"

"But, Lieutenant, I was sure that she was some kind of transvestite, to be claiming like this to be the girlfriend of that queer." Answered Kyle Ross, standing in front of the desk of the boss of the Vice Squad and feeling very much in his small shoes. His excuse did little to calm down Lieutenant Bruno Chiarrelli.

"Then, you should have checked her out in some empty room or, better still, requested the assistance of a nurse to physically check her out. Now, we are likely going to be hit with either a lawsuit or even a criminal charge against you and the department."

"Surely, Lieutenant, the District Attorney will dismiss any such charge out of hand."

"With a doctor and two nurses ready to testify in favor of that woman? Our Christmas raid on that gay bar has already raised a lot more stink than I thought possible, thanks to the presence of a number of sons of rich and influential people at the time. The ACLU⁶ also got its nose in this case, big time. Worse, you, the detective in charge of that raid, may just be facing accusations from that woman of sexual impropriety or even of sexual assault. At the very least, this means that you can't testify anymore in court against that Robert Purnell or against any of the other customers of that gay bar. If you tried to, any good lawyer defending those queers would then have an easy time throwing your testimony out of court. Now, what do you know about that woman?"

Ross took the time to take out his notepad and consult it before answering Chiarrelli.

"Her name is Sylvia Thorne. She lives in an apartment on Colton Street, near Chinatown. I can have her checked out, to see if we could find something embarrassing against her."

⁶ ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union. A private organization dedicated to defending the civil rights of individuals.

"Do that! However, make sure that you personally stay away from that woman until I say otherwise. Kapiche?"

"Uh, yes, Lieutenant!"

16:21 (California Time)

Vice Squad office, Los Angeles F.B.I. Division

Suite 1700, Wilshire Federal Building, Sawtelle District

Los Angeles

"Listen up, people: we have a new assignment straight from Washington!"

On hearing their squad leader, the four F.B.I. agents who had been reading documents or writing reports looked up and sat back in their chairs as Roger Fairfax stopped in the middle of the squad office.

"Here is the poop: Director Hoover just tasked us to investigate possible constitutional rights violations by the L.A.P.D. Vice Squad when they raided the 'Surfers Karaoke Bar' last Christmas. You guys certainly heard about that raid, right?"

Grunts and eye rolls greeted his hypothetical question: that raid had made the front pages of the newspapers then, partly because the sons of a few important politicians had been beaten up and arrested, like the other occupants of the bar, during what had been described as a particularly brutal police operation, even by the standards of the L.A.P.D.. Fairfax smiled at their reactions.

"I see that you do know about that raid. Well, the son of a Washington senator who was beaten up and arrested at that time complained to his father, who in turn complained vigorously to the Attorney General himself, who then ordered Director Hoover to investigate this incident in order to establish if federally recognized constitutional rights were violated."

"Uh, I could name two or three such rights that were violated then, Roger." Replied the rookie of the squad, Janet Coleman, a pretty 25-year old brunette who held a law degree from Harvard. "We could start with the right of free association and assembly, followed by the right of freedom from discrimination."

"Very good, Janet! I see that you are already pointing in the right direction. For your knowledge, a complaint of deprivation of constitutional rights has just been registered by that Washington senator. Also, the girlfriend of a young man that had been beaten into a coma by the L.A.P.D. during the raid on that bar just registered an

accusation of sexual assault against a Detective Kyle Ross, who happened to be in charge of the raid on the 'Surfers Karaoke Bar': he allegedly touched her crotch in public at the Good Samaritan Hospital, while she was visiting her boyfriend."

More than a few brows raised at the word 'girlfriend', prompting Special Agent George Adams in asking a question.

"Did you say 'girlfriend', Roger? When talking about an alleged homosexual, that term sounds a bit contradictory to me."

"True! That woman however insists that the young man in question, a Robert Purnell, is not an homosexual and was arrested simply for being inside the bar. Oh, one important caveat, though: that Robert Purnell, seeing a friend of his being pummeled with truncheons by a number of L.A.P.D. officers, flew into a rage and punched out one of the officers. He was then jumped on by half a dozen cops who beat him into a coma. He just came out of his coma yesterday, at the Good Samaritan Hospital."

"Well, if the L.A.P.D. cops truly beat and arrested all those men just because they were inside that bar, that would clearly constitute a violation of the right to free assembly." Said Janet. "As for that Robert Purnell, I suppose that he could plea either self-defense or temporary insanity when he saw his friend being beaten up. I suspect that so many irregularities and abuses were committed during that raid by the L.A.P.D. that it would not be difficult for a good lawyer to have all the charges against Purnell dropped."

"I see that you understand this case well, Janet. I will thus task you to investigate in particular the case of that Robert Purnell and the accusations raised by his girlfriend. George will be your partner and backup on this. It will be a good occasion at the same time for me to evaluate your present level of performance as an investigator."

"Fair enough, Roger. What info can you give me about that Robert Purnell and his, uh, girlfriend?"

In response, Fairfax took out a thin file from the leather case he held in his left hand, giving it to Janet.

"Here is what we know of him and of his girlfriend. You also have there the official complaint by the girlfriend on behalf of Purnell, plus a copy of the charges and of the picture taken of Purnell after his arrest."

Janet opened the file and nearly immediately frowned as she examined the picture of Purnell: his face was blue and swollen nearly all over, while dried blood matted his hair. It was also evident that he had been unconscious when the picture had been taken.

"Right there, a good lawyer could claim police brutality and excessive use of force, in my opinion. It is high time that these L.A.P.D. Vice cops be reined in."

"Agreed! The federal prosecutor for Los Angeles will be expecting the results of your investigation, so work diligently and quickly, Janet."

"You can count on me, Roger." Replied Janet Coleman, already fired up by her new assignment.

As Roger Fairfax started briefing his other two agents on what he was expecting from them, George Adams rolled his chair to beside Janet's chair, in order to look at the file given to her by Roger. He also winced when he looked at the picture of Purnell.

"Poor guy! He certainly didn't deserve that just for being in a gay bar."

"An alleged gay bar, George." Corrected Janet, her law degree side surfacing. "From what I remember of the news about the raid, the occupants all claimed that no sexual activity was going on in the bar and that they were just drinking and celebrating Christmas. The L.A.P.D. supposedly rushed inside with batons and truncheons held high and started immediately to beat the patrons and the staff of the bar. The arrest procedures used during that raid will certainly be one of the things we will need to establish firmly, in order to build a case of constitutional rights violations. Now, let's see what we have about that girlfriend of Purnell who laid charges of sexual assault against Detective Ross."

"By the way, Janet, I know that Ross quite well: he is an arrogant bastard who thinks that his badge allows him to do about anything."

"Really? That should actually help us in this case. Well, the charge against him was laid by a Sylvia Thorne, domiciled in Apartment 36, 421 Colton Street..."

Seeing Janet hesitate, George Adams gave her a questioning look.

"Is something wrong, Janet?"

"Uh, this must be a hell of a coincidence, but that Sylvia Thorne lives in the same building as Jennifer Woods, the stripper from the 'Pussycat Cabaret' who helped us in last June's case of child kidnapping and snuff porn. In fact, she lives on the same floor, next door to Woods, who occupies Apartment 34."

"Interesting! And what is her official occupation?"

"According to this affidavit, she is a professional model. I guess that one of our first steps will be to go visit her. Then we will go visit Purnell at the hospital."

"Sounds like a plan to me. I will go sign for a car."

Twelve minutes later, they were rolling out of the underground garage of their building in an unmarked dark blue Ford sedan. With George Adams at the wheel, they took Wilshire Boulevard, heading east in the dense afternoon traffic, then turned north on the Pasadena Freeway, exiting at the Beverly Boulevard. Turning right once at the corner with Lucas Avenue, they turned right again on Colton Street.

"I now remember the place from when we were keeping a protective stakeout of Woods' apartment building, when that Hurst bastard was sending hired assassins her way. By the way, has anyone caught that Hurst yet, or his lawyer stooge?"

"Nope! They seem to have disappeared from the face of this Earth." Replied Janet, not knowing how close to the truth she was. "Here we are: number 421!" George was about to pull over and park in front of the run-down brick building when he noticed something and abruptly parked short of the apartment block.

"Heads up, Janet! I see an unmarked van parked in front of Thorne's building: it has an L.A. municipal plate on it. I bet that the L.A.P.D. is watching Thorne's apartment."

Janet frowned at that: that sounded very much like a retaliatory harassment tactic against someone who had complained against the L.A.P.D., something quite illegal by itself if no legal justification existed.

"Decidedly, those idiots are really way out of line in this case. What do we do now?"

"We go out, act like a normal couple and pass by that van to discreetly check it out. Then we will go inside the building and ring Thorne's apartment."

"Got it!"

Both agents stepped out of their car, then joined hands like a married couple would before walking down the sidewalk towards the van and the apartment building. Going at a slow, leisurely pace, they were able to see that no one was inside the front cab of the van when they passed by it.

"Nobody in!" Whispered George. "I couldn't see any extra antenna or hidden window, so I doubt that there would be anyone in the back, listening or watching. Whoever came here in it must be inside the building."

"Then, they better have a search warrant with them, if they came to search Thorne's apartment. If not, that will be another legal nail in their coffin."

Now fully alert, the two F.B.I. agents walked to the entrance of the apartment building, passing the glass and aluminum main door and stepping inside a small lobby in which small mailboxes were lined up against one wall. Another glass door, a locked one, stopped them from going up the staircase visible beyond the second door. Taking a quick decision, George pressed on the buzz button of the intercom located above the mailboxes, to speak with the building superintendent. A female voice answered him after a few seconds.

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"F.B.I.! We are here to visit Miss Thorne, at Apartment 36."

"More cops? But, three policemen already went up to her apartment less than twenty minutes ago. Is something going on about Miss Thorne?"

George exchanged a knowing glance with Janet before speaking again in the intercom.

"Miss Thorne didn't do anything wrong, madam. We are simply here to speak to her as a witness in a case. Please open up!"

"Alright, you may enter, but I want to see your badges before you go up."

"We have no problem with that, madam."

A buzzing sound then prompted Janet to pull on the inside door, which opened at once. A graying woman wearing a cooking apron over her dress then appeared in the doorframe of the nearest ground level apartment.

"May I see your badges, please?"

"Here you are, madam." Replied Janet, flashing her F.B.I. badge and I.D. card. George did the same, making the woman nod her head and point to the nearby staircase.

"Very well! You may go up."

"Thank you, madam!" Said Janet before starting to quickly climb the stairs, heading for the third floor, George close behind her. She however slowed down and took care to be as quiet as possible before arriving on that floor. Stepping on the wooden floor of a short corridor with six doors lined along the two sides of it, Janet pointed at the nearest door on her left.

"This is Jennifer Woods' apartment, Unit 36. Thorne's apartment should be the next one on the same side."

Nearly tiptoeing in order to be as silent as possible, the two F.B.I. agents positioned themselves on each side of door number 34, with George putting an ear against the door to listen. After only a few seconds, he whispered to Janet.

"I hear movement from multiple persons inside. Make sure that your badge is visible and have your revolver at the ready, just in case."

George then grabbed both his badge and his revolver before knocking on the door and speaking up loudly.

"F.B.I.! OPEN UP!"

There was suddenly a flurry of whispered exclamations and shuffling noises before the door opened after maybe twenty seconds. The man who opened the door looked severely at the two federal agents while holding a police badge at eye level.

"I'm Sergeant Resnick, from the Intelligence Division of the L.A.P.D.. What is the F.B.I. doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, buster!" Replied George Adams, not intimidated one bit. "The person renting this apartment has filed charges of sexual assault against one of your detectives, while we are investigating a complaint of violation of constitutional rights by your police department, so you better have a damn good explanation for your presence here. Is Miss Thorne here?"

"No!" Simply said Resnick while still blocking the doorway with his body.

"Then, show me the warrant that allows you to be here, searching this apartment." Replied coldly George. The hesitation of Resnick then told him what he wanted to know. Roughly pushing Resnick out of the way, George walked inside, his revolver still in his hand, and looked at the two other men wearing suits who were inside. His trained eyes then noticed the telephone sitting on a small table of the lounge: its bottom had been undone and there were various tools beside it. It was also evident that the place had been searched.

"You are tapping Miss Thorne's phone, on top of searching her apartment? Show me a signed warrant that allows you to do this!"

Instead of producing a document, Resnick shook his head in disdain.

"We don't need a warrant! This is our area of jurisdiction, not yours. Now, let us do our job and leave!"

"Like Hell we are! You were engaged in a flagrant violation of the constitutional right to privacy of Miss Thorne and were committing an act of illegal search and wiretapping. Janet, note down the full name and badge number of that clown. You two, pass me your police badges and I.D. cards! As for your bugging equipment and tools, I confiscate them as being accessories to a crime."

Realizing that they had been caught red-handed, the Los Angeles policemen grudgingly obeyed, handing their badges and cards to George and Janet. The F.B.I. agents were still noting down the names and badge numbers when a female voice coming from the doorway startled them all.

"WHO ARE YOU? WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY APARTMENT?"

Pivoting to face the door, George saw that a statuesque blonde in her mid twenties with a huge chest stood in the doorway, looking with indignation at the four men and one woman inside. Janet took on her to walk to the woman, who stood a good half foot taller than her, flashing her badge.

"Special Agent Janet Coleman, F.B.I.. Me and my colleague, to my right, came to your apartment to get your deposition about your accusation of sexual assault against you by the L.A.P.D. and to ask you about the case of Robert Purnell. We however stumbled on the three men over there, who are from the L.A.P.D. and were busy searching and bugging your apartment and telephone, all without a proper judicial warrant. If you want to register a complaint about violations or your right to privacy, I will be more than happy to file it with the federal attorney."

Sylvia threw a murderous look at the three L.A.P.D. men before looking back at Janet.

"Damn right I will file a complaint about this! Do you mind if I inspect my apartment first, before those assholes leave, so that I can make sure that they didn't remove anything?"

"By all means, Miss Thorne."

"Thank you!"

While Sylvia went through her apartment, checking on her things, Janet stood firmly in the doorway of the entrance, blocking the L.A.P.D. men from leaving and giving ample time to George to finish noting down their names and badge numbers. Sylvia finally came back into the lounge and gave a murderous look at the L.A.P.D. cops.

"Nothing seems to be missing...thankfully for you. You can tell your genius bosses that I will be bringing charges of illegal entry, search and wiretapping against you and them. Now, get the hell out of my apartment!"

She followed with her eyes the three departing men, who had to leave their tools behind, then looked at the two F.B.I. agents. Far from being a coincidence, her arrival at her apartment had been triggered by the magical ward that she had put on it, alerting her to the fact that someone had intruded in it.

"I must thank you for your most timely visit. Now, what can I do for you in return? But, please, do sit down on my sofa first."

"Thank you!" Said George before taking place with Janet in the tired sofa of the lounge. The apartment's furniture didn't strike of near poverty, but it was obvious that Sylvia Thorne didn't swim in money...unless she was stashing her earnings in some bank account in expectation of her future old age. On her part, Sylvia sat in a chair set facing the sofa from across the narrow lounge.

"Miss Thorne, the F.B.I. is investigating possible violations of personal constitutional rights that would have been committed by the L.A.P.D. during a Christmas raid on a gay bar in Santa Monica. We know that a Robert Purnell was one of the men arrested during that raid and that you claim to be his girlfriend. Is that correct?"

"Partly, as you told only part of the story, mister. He was in fact beaten into a coma by cops after he tried to defend a friend who was being brutally beaten by baton-wielding police officers. When I learned yesterday that he was in hospital, I rushed to visit him. That was when a L.A.P.D. Vice Squad detective, a Kyle Ross, accosted me as I was about to enter Robert's room at the Good Samaritan. When I told him that I was Robert's girlfriend, he evidently thought that I was lying and that I was actually a transvestite. That was when he put his hand under my skirt to touch and feel my genitals. Thankfully, a few nurses and a doctor saw that and offered themselves as witnesses in my favor."

"What happened then?" Asked Janet, who was taking notes.

"I told that Ross that I would register a complaint against him for sexual assault, then went back to speak with Robert, who had just awakened from his coma. He was then able to tell me in detail what happened at the 'Surfers' Karaoke Bar' on Christmas."

"We will certainly go speak with him later on. Is he still in hospital, by the way?"

"Yes, he is! The doctors want to monitor him for another day or two, in case that he suffers some sequel from his commotion."

"That is probably a wise precaution. Would you mind coming to the F.B.I. downtown office to formally register your accusations against the L.A.P.D. and to make signed depositions, so that the federal attorney can file charges against those city cops?"

"I would be most happy to! That way, my New Year will start on the right footing, with those intolerant bastards' brutality and flouting of the law being publicly exposed."

But, first, I think I need to do something. Miss, could you come with me to the bathroom?"

"Uh, sure!" Replied Janet, unsure at first about what Sylvia wanted to do. She then understood in a flash and got up from the sofa, following Sylvia inside the nearby bathroom. Less than a minute later, both women walked back in the lounge, with Janet nodding to George.

"She is no transvestite, George."

"Then, that Kyle Ross could well say goodbye to his badge soon. Let's go back to our office now. We will of course provide you with a ride back to your home, Miss Thorne."

"I thank you for that, mister. On the other hand, I must thank you and the F.B.I. as well for making it possible to bring true justice to my boyfriend."

With Janet leading and with George grabbing the equipment confiscated from the L.A.P.D. cops, the trio then left the apartment, Sylvia carefully locking it behind her before going down to the agents' car.

Sylvia was back in her apartment a bit over three hours later, quite satisfied with her time spent at the F.B.I. offices. Her complaints had now been turned to formal accusations against the L.A.P.D. and its vice squad, accusations that were now certain to go to court, unless someone cracked at L.A.P.D. Headquarters and made a deal with her. However, such a deal was going to have to include at a minimum the dropping of all criminal charges against Robert Purnell before she would even consider accepting it. Even if it went to court, something that was probably going to happen, she had a few tricks in her bag to turn that trial her way. Sylvia/Delicia smiled to herself at the thoughts of all the hypocrites she was going to be able to expose and punish.

09:45 (California Time)

Saturday, January 5, 1974

Offices of the 'Sterling and Associates' Law Firm

Spring Street, Downtown Los Angeles

"Please, have a seat! Would you like coffee, tea or water before we start talking?"

"Thank you but no, Mister Sterling." Replied Sylvia as she took one of the two padded chairs facing the huge work desk of Vance Sterling.

"I will take a glass of cold water, please." Said Robert Purnell. Sterling glanced at the secretary who had introduced the couple in his office.

"Could you get a glass of cold water for Mister Purnell, Anita?"

"Right away, Mister Sterling."

As the secretary walked out of his office, Sterling discreetly examined Robert Purnell. The young man was evidently fit and muscular, apart from having an impressive bulk and height, but his head and face were swollen and bruised in many places from what had to have been a very vicious beating. He waited until her secretary had come back with a glass of water for Purnell before he started speaking to the young man.

"I am pleased to be able to tell you that I decided to accept to defend you, Mister Purnell. After looking at your request and checking a few things with the Los Angeles Prosecutor's Office, I believe that your case has a lot of legal merit and can be won. However, I must caution you that the charges filed against you are quite serious and may need extensive work and time to counter them. I am saying this because my standard fees are quite high, thanks to my reputation and record of successes in court, and because the city prosecutor seems to be ready to pursue this case aggressively and may even appeal if he loses the first trial."

"I am ready to cover Robert's legal expenses, Mister Sterling." Said at once Sylvia. "What I want is true justice for my boyfriend. I made quite a lot of money as a professional model in Europe before coming to the United States and am willing to spend whatever will be needed to clear Robert from the charges laid against him."

"And what are exactly the charges against me, Mister Sterling?" Asked Robert, prompting the lawyer to pick up a document on his desk and read a few lines from it.

"The Los Angeles Prosecutor's Office has filed against you charges of 'lewd and lascivious behavior', 'disorderly conduct', 'resisting arrest' and 'aggravated assault against a police officer'. By far the most serious charge is the one of aggravated assault against a police officer, although the charges of lewd and lascivious behavior and of disorderly conduct could get you some prison time, a fine and would also force you to register as a sex offender, something that would weigh heavily on you in many ways in your life, like when looking for a job or for a place to live. Being found a sex offender could even result in you being forcibly sterilized. Thankfully, this barbaric punishment is now rarely applied in California."

"Sterilized?!" Exclaimed Robert, both shocked and incensed. "But, that's ludicrous! The only thing I did before the cops came crashing in with batons raised high was to drink and dance with a friend in the 'Surfers Karaoke Bar'. And they would sterilize me for that?"

Sterling made an apologetic smile as Sylvia listened on, truly stunned and outraged.

"I am sorry, Mister Purnell, but that is what the law in California says. I must tell you that California, as prosperous and modern as it is now, is by far the state with the most restrictive, if not to say repressive, laws about sex in this country. Many have been lobbying to tone down or even repeal those laws, which include the 1872 Sodomy Law of California, the 1915 Statute against Fellatio and Cunnilingus and the 1939 Psychopathic Offender Law, but they are still technically in force in California."

"They base their judgments on sex on a law dating from 1872?!"

"Yes, and a married couple, meaning a man and a woman, could still be arrested in California for practicing anal or oral sex in the privacy of their own home. Thankfully, I expect the laws concerning sexual acts in private between consenting adults to be amended or repealed by the end of this year."

"Unbelievable!" Couldn't help saying Sylvia. "What about the charge of aggravated assault against a police officer? What is the penalty for that if found guilty?"

"Mister Purnell would then look at a possible prison sentence of five years or more in prison." Replied Sterling, his expression sober. "However, in view of the circumstances of his arrest and the way he was savagely beaten by the police, I believe that we would have a good chance of either getting a not guilty verdict or of making a deal with the prosecutor to drop all charges against him, in exchange for dropping the charges of wrongful arrest and of denial of constitutional rights he wants to bring against the L.A.P.D.. Personally, I believe that arranging such a deal with the city prosecutor would be safer and simpler than to go to trial."

"And what if the city prosecutor refuses to make such a deal?" Asked Robert, now quite nervous. That brought a mean grin on Sterling's face.

"If he does refuse to make a deal, then I will light a legal blowtorch under the city's ass, Mister Purnell."

"And I will gladly help you in my own way, Mister Sterling." Thought Sylvia.

10:02 (California Time)

Wednesday, January 9, 1974

North Campus Student Center

University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA)

Patricia Love was rounding a corner in the main ground level hallway of the university's North Campus Student Center when she saw a small crowd ahead of her. The crowd was surrounding a tall, big student who had his back to a row of lockers, while harsh words were clearly audible. A flash of anger rose in her when she recognized the student who was surrounded and she hurried her steps, arriving near the group as Dave Bakersfield, the star quarterback of the UCLA Bruins football team, was nearly shouting in the face of Robert Purnell.

"WE DON'T WANT FAGS IN OUR TEAM, PURNELL! DON'T EVEN TRY TO ENTER OUR LOCKER ROOM AT THE NEXT PRACTICE OR WE WILL TEACH YOU A LESSON THAT YOU WILL REMEMBER."

"THAT'S THE COACH'S DECISION TO MAKE, NOT YOURS, BAKERSFIELD! BESIDE, I AM NOT GAY!"

"OH YEAH? THEN WHAT WERE YOU DOING IN A GAY BAR LAST CHRISTMAS? YOU..."

Bakersfield didn't have time to finish his sentence before Patricia plowed her way through the small crowd of onlookers and pushed aside two of the students backing him.

"You talk shit as always, Bakersfield!" Said Patricia forcibly as she jabbed hard her right index in the young man's chest. She used that occasion as well to silently bestow a curse on him as she was in contact with him. "Bob is a friend of mine and I know him well."

Bakersfield gave her a contemptuous look as his seven followers, all players with the UCLA Bruins, formed menacingly on each side of him, glaring at Patricia.

"Now now, ain't this the university slut in person, coming to defend a fag?"

To everyone's astonishment, Patricia's answer to that was to grab the front of Bakersfield's jersey in a lightning move and, pivoting on her heels with him in her grip, throw him violently against a steel locker, his back slamming hard in a loud noise. She then stared hard in his eyes as Robert Purnell stepped forward to protect her back from Bakersfield's minions.

"Listen up and listen well, you hypocritical asshole! You were yourself too happy to have me around at your parties but you don't own me. Nobody owns me! Now, you will leave my friend alone and will leave now with your gang of ass-licking sissies, or I will be the one teaching you a lesson."

A concert of gasps and exclamations of wonderment went around at the sight of the star quarterback being manhandled by a girl. Seeing that his reputation was taking a hit, Bakersfield tried to break free from her grip, only to be slammed back even harder against the locker, cutting his breath away and caving in the locker's door with a noise of tortured steel.

"This is your last warning, asshole: leave now or pay for it."

More exclamations went around again when Bakersfield, thoroughly intimidated by her monstrous strength, chose to withdraw without a fight, walking quickly away with his followers while glancing back a few times at Patricia. The latter then looked around her at the small crowd still surrounding her and Robert.

"There is nothing to look at here, folks. Move along, please!"

Slowly at first, the onlookers dispersed, finally leaving Patricia alone with Robert Purnell, who gave her a grateful smile.

"I don't know how you did that, Patricia, but I must thank you for your help."

In response, Patricia got close to him and spoke in a whisper, so that no one else could hear her.

"I could do that because me and Sylvia are one, Robert. Shape-shifting has its usefulness, but it is not the only power I have. This, of course, must stay a secret."

Robert's smile turned to a bewildered look as he stared down in her eyes.

"You, Sylvia?"

"Yes, I am Sylvia...and Patricia. Has this asshole been bothering you for long about this?"

"Only since yesterday, when a newspaper article identified me as one of the men arrested during the raid on the 'Surfer's Karaoke Bar'. Now, I am afraid that my football coach will ban me from the team. I hope to Hell that he won't, but I suspect that Bakersfield will do his best to convince him to expel me. If that happens, I don't know what I will do: football is my passion, always has been."

"I know, Robert. Somehow, things will arrange themselves. Don't lose hope and believe in yourself...and in me."

"I...I will! Thanks again, Patricia." Replied Robert, sounding only half convinced, before walking away. Patricia watched him go, feeling bad for that gentle giant: Robert Purnell really deserved better than this. At least, one asshole would now pay for this...all his life.

21:18 (California Time)

Dave Bakersfield's apartment

Magnolia Court, Weyburn Terrace Housing Complex

UCLA campus

"I swear to God that I will get that fag thrown out of the team. As for that bitch, Love, I am going to make her regret defending that Purnell."

Norma Etteridge, lying naked in his bed and waiting for him to finish undressing, made a dismissive gesture with one hand.

"Forget those two, Dave: they are not worth your time. Come and show me what a real man can do."

Encouraged by her words, Bakersfield pulled down his briefs and kicked them away. He was about to jump in bed when he realized with a shock that his penis was still limp. Norma noticed that as well.

"That encounter with that bitch must have really stressed you out, Dave. Let me help you here."

Sitting on the edge of the bed and facing Dave, Norma took hold of his penis with both hands and started rubbing it, pulling away the foreskin and denuding its tip, then licking it. To her surprise, and to Dave's horror, the desired effect of her stimulation didn't happen and, after nearly a minute of fondling and licking, Dave's penis was still as limp as it had even been. Giving a befuddled glance at her boyfriend, Norma renewed her efforts, using all her expertise in the matter, but in vain. She finally gave up after nearly five futile minutes.

"I...I don't know what is happening, Dave. I never failed to excite you before." Bakersfield, now bordering on panic, could only stare at his limp, shrunken dick.

"What is happening to me? MY GOD, I AM IMPOTENT!"

14:29 (California Time)

Thursday, January 17, 1974

Hall of Justice Building, North Spring Street

Downtown Los Angeles

Vance Sterling gave a reassuring smile to Robert Purnell, who was visibly nervous, as the young man sat beside him at the defense table in front of the judge's bench of the small courtroom.

"No need to be nervous, Mister Purnell: this is only a pre-trial hearing meant to take your preliminary plea and to set the date of the trial itself. By the way, I insisted on a trial by jury."

"Thank you, Mister Sterling. Still, my whole life could depend on the outcome of this."

Sterling nodded his head once at that, knowing that his client was too right about that. He then glanced quickly at Sylvia Thorne, who had taken a place on the first row of wooden benches behind the defense table. He had been quite surprised to see that the young woman, who was supposedly of modest origin and means, had been able to pay his preliminary fees in cash without a problem, even though he was known to be quite a pricey lawyer. The city's prosecuting attorney, William Stone, a man Sterling loathed for being both unscrupulous and dishonest, had also been surprised that Purnell could afford Vance's service, even asking him about it. He then sat back and placed his various files in front of him on the table.

They all rose to their feet twelve minutes later, when the judge walked in, announced by the court bailiff.

"All rise for The Honorable James Ritter, judge of the Los Angeles District Municipal Court."

Ritter, a thin man in his advanced fifties, sat down behind the judge's bench and, grabbing his gavel, knocked it three times.

"This court is now in session! You may now sit."

Waiting for the persons present, including a few reporters, to sit back down, Ritter then grabbed a document and read calmly from it.

"This session has been called to take a preliminary plea and set a trial date for the case 'Purnell vs Los Angeles'. Are the defense and prosecution ready to proceed?"

"Yes, Your Honor!" Answered Vance, getting up briefly, imitated by Stone. The judge then made the court clerk read the charge sheet.

"The City of Los Angeles has laid the following charges against Mister Robert Purnell, domiciled at Apartment 26, 117 Kelton Avenue: aggravated assault causing bodily harm against a police officer, resisting arrest, disorderly conduct, lewd and lascivious behavior and frequenting a place of ill repute."

The judge then looked at Robert with a neutral expression.

"Is the accused ready to give a plea against those accusations?"

Vance Sterling answered that question after getting up with Robert.

"Yes, Your Honor! The accused pleads 'not guilty' to all the charges."

"The Court Clerk will thus register the plea of 'not guilty' from the accused. Does the prosecutor wishes to add to the charges at this time?"

Stone got up and gave a mean look at Robert before answering.

"No, Your Honor! However, the prosecution still holds that the defendant, who is accused of attacking a police officer, is a dangerous suspect and should be held in confinement until the trial."

Robert Purnell felt his heart stop for a moment as the judge mulled that request from Stone. Ritter finally shook his head briefly and spoke while staring at the prosecutor.

"Mister Stone, no new element has surfaced in this case since the granting of bail to justify such a pre-trial confinement. Request denied!"

Then looking at a court appointment calendar in front of him, Ritter wrote down a date on a notepad and looked at Vance Sterling and Robert Purnell.

"I set the date of the trial to Friday, May the Third of this year. The trial will be in front of a jury and will be presided by The Honorable Judge Paul Resting. Are there any objections to that date?"

"No, Your Honor!" Answered Sterling and Stone, making Ritter slam his gavel down.

"Then, the Court Clerk will register the coming trial for May the Third, 1974. This session is adjourned!"

Waiting until the judge had walked out of the courtroom, Robert then looked at Vance Sterling, who couldn't hide a bit of gloom on his face, as Sylvia listened on.

"Is something wrong, Mister Sterling?"

"Maybe! Judge Paul Resting, who will preside on your case, is an old fossil who is widely known to be severely biased against homosexuals. We couldn't have ended with a worse judge than him."

"Can't we ask for another judge?"

"Not really, unless we can prove that he has some conflict of interests in your case. Don't worry too much, though: the jury will decide your guilt or innocence, not Judge Resting."

Vance then gave a dark look at William Stone, who had a mean, taunting smile as he was about to walk out.

"Good luck for your degenerate, Sterling. Resting will nail him real good at the trial."

"Don't shout 'victory' yet, Stone."

On her part, Sylvia eyed coldly the prosecutor as he walked out of the courtroom.

'Be ready for a few surprises, you asshole!'

17:32 (California Time)

Monday, January 21, 1974

Private chambers, Municipal Court

Hall of Justice Building, Downtown Los Angeles

The Honorable Paul Resting took off his ceremonial court robe and suspended it on the coat rack of his private chambers, then went to his work desk, on which he had just put down the trial notes and documents pertaining to the case he had presided this afternoon. He was actually quite satisfied with his day of work, having all but demolished the defense of the accused by handcuffing his lawyer.

'Another queer bites the dust!' He thought as he sat down at his work desk. He never saw or sensed Delicia's presence, who was using her spell-like ability of invisibility to hide and wait inside Resting's chambers. As Resting was rereading some notes he had taken during today's trial, he suddenly hesitated, then stopped reading, his eyes becoming dazed. He also lost control of his facial expressions and quickly started drooling, saliva dropping from the corner of his mouth and dripping on his notes. Delicia then teleported out and went back to her Westwood home, having just uttered a 'Feeble Mind' spell on Resting and turning him permanently into the intellectual equivalent of a lizard. Resting was discovered hours later by a court security guard doing his evening

rounds, still sitting behind his work desk with his eyes empty and his mouth drooling. The panicked guard called for medics at once, who in turn loaded Resting on a gurney and drove him to the nearest hospital, where he was diagnosed with a probable neuro-vascular accident causing irreversible brain damage.

18:11 (California Time)

Wednesday, January 23, 1974

Robert Purnell's apartment, Kelton Avenue

Westwood District, Los Angeles

"Hello?!"

"Mister Purnell, this is Vance Sterling."

"Oh, good evening Mister Sterling. What can I do for you?"

"I actually called to pass on to you a piece of news that, while tragic, could be positive for our cause in court. Judge Resting suffered some kind of cerebral accident two days ago and is now considered permanently unable to practice law and judge cases. As a result, he has been replaced as your case's judge by Judge James Ritter, a man with a much more liberal mindset. The date of your trial has also been changed and is now scheduled for Thursday, July the 25th of this year."

"Er, let me grab a pen to write that down, Mister Sterling."

"Take your time, Robert."

"...I'm ready now! You said 'July 25th'?"

"Correct! Will that date do for you? I asked for such a late date so that you would have time to finish your Spring session at the university."

"That date will be perfect for me, Mister Sterling. Thank you for having called."

"It was my pleasure, Robert." Said Sterling before hanging up. Now feeling as if a big weight had been taken off his chest, Robert went to sit back on his sofa, where he had been watching a hockey game happening on the East Coast. Judge Ritter had given him a good impression during his brief pre-trial hearing and Robert could certainly use every piece of good news about his trial, as the city prosecutor and the L.A.P.D. showed no signs of easing their attitudes towards him. He was tempted for a moment to call Sylvia to pass the news to her, but refrained at the last moment, remembering her warnings about his apartment being possibly watched and his telephone bugged by the police. He thus decided to wait until tomorrow, when he would be able to see Patricia

Love at the university. That brought a short-lived suspicion in his mind about the possibility that Sylvia/Patricia could have been implicated in the cerebral accident that had struck Judge Resting. He finally dismissed that thought: even a shape-shifting alien would have limits to her powers, right?

10:40 (California Time)

Thursday, January 24, 1974

Broad Art Center, UCLA campus

Patricia Love was walking down a hallway of the Broad Art Center Building, going along with a flow of other students in a hurry to get to their next class, when she started feeling mentally the thoughts of someone close by with intense anger and hatred directed at her. Now on her guards, she slowed down her pace a bit and turned into a side corridor that led to a secondary staircase. There were much fewer students in that corridor but, whoever was after her, she wanted no witnesses to her actions to come. Seeing a female washroom near the staircase at the end of the corridor, Patricia entered it and quickly checked that nobody else was inside, looking under the doors of the toilet stalls. She then positioned herself behind the door of the washroom and waited. Less than three seconds later, Norma Etteridge entered the washroom, hiding something behind the leather briefcase she held with both hands. That was when Patricia closed the door of the washroom in her back and coldly stared at the Bruins head cheerleader.

"What do you want with me, Etteridge?"

The sight of Patricia, blocking the door, brought a look of utter fury in Etteridge's eyes.

"YOU! YOU CAUSED HIS SUICIDE, YOU WITCH!"

"Whose suicide?" Asked Patricia, genuinely surprised by this.

"YOU KNOW VERY WELL WHOSE SUICIDE I AM TALKING ABOUT! MY BOYFRIEND, DAVE BAKERSFIELD, HANGED HIMSELF LAST NIGHT AND IT'S ALL YOUR FAULT! YOU MADE HIM LOSE FACE IN FRONT OF EVERYBODY AND HE HAS NEVER BEEN THE SAME SINCE THEN."

"Your boyfriend was a sissy and a bully, that's what. He could only date empty knuckleheads like you."

That proved too much for Etteridge to take. Dropping her briefcase and uncovering a long knife held in her right hand, she raised her weapon and threw herself at Patricia while screaming like a fury. She however could not make more than two steps before a

bright green ray shot out of Patricia's right hand, striking her in the chest. Etteridge only had time to push an ultimate scream of pain and despair before she was enveloped in a green halo and turned into ashes, disintegrated into oblivion. Patricia coldly looked down at the small pile of ashes on the floor of the washroom, with Etteridge's briefcase beside it.

"From dust you came and to dust you returned. See you in Hell, bitch!"

Grabbing the girl's briefcase first, Patricia teleported to inside her Westwood home and hid the compromising item in her basement before jumping back to the Broad Art Center. Tonight, she was going to have ample time to make that briefcase disappear. This way, nobody was going to ever be able to say what happened to the cheerleader and why she had apparently disappeared without a trace today.

CHAPTER 6 – PARENTHOOD

04:19 (California Time)

Saturday, January 26, 1974

Patricia Love's residence, Lindbrook Drive

Westwood District, Los Angeles

California, U.S.A.

The telepathic message hit her brain full force, waking Patricia up from her night relaxation period.

'PATRICIA, WAKE UP! THIS IS JOHN: I HAVE GREAT NEWS!'

Taking a couple of seconds to return to full alertness, Patricia then touched with two fingers the polished black gem she had been wearing by its gold neck chain since her return from Japan, activating the alien mental communication device and thinking her response.

'What is it, John? Is it about your two dragon eggs?'

'Yes! They just hatched!'

'They did? Do the hatchlings look healthy?'

'They are and they proved to be famished. I am presently feeding them in the basement of the bar. Can you come?'

'Of course I can! I wouldn't miss this on my life. Just give me time to get dressed and I will teleport to your bar.'

'Thank you my friend! I will be expecting you.'

The telepathic link was then cut. Now excited herself by such a fantastic event, Patricia jumped out of bed and quickly dressed, putting on a set of jeans, T-shirt and running shoes. Once clothed, she concentrated for a moment, teleporting out of her home. She rematerialized in the main basement room of the 'Friends' Corner Bar', where John Hideyoshi had been keeping inside a large incubator the two dragon eggs salvaged from the ancient underground base in Mount Fuji. When she arrived, she saw that the eggs, now broken open, had been taken out of their incubator and that two dragon wyrmlings were now resting on large cushions, with John giving them in turn portions of raw minced

meat. John's smile of happiness turned into a grin when he saw Patricia appear in the middle of the room.

"Aaah, my dear friend! Let me present you my offsprings from my beloved Kannon: I named them respectively Susano and Amaterasu, in honor of my own parents."

Patricia approached the wyrmlings slowly, in order not to scare them, while eyeing them with fascination. They were each the size of an adult condor and were covered with the same kind of golden, feather-like scales that she had seen on John when he had been in his dragon shape. Their wings, when extended, had to span a good six feet, if not more, while their body, including the tail, measured about five feet in length. Both wyrmlings briefly stopped eating when she approached them and looked at her with their golden eyes, prompting Patricia to speak to them in Draconic.

"Hello, Susano and Amaterasu! I am Patricia, a friend of your father."

"They are still too young to know how to speak, Patricia, but they will learn quickly enough. Aren't they beautiful?"

"They certainly are, John. You must be proud as Hell."

"Oh, I am! With them, my race will be able to live on on this planet. However, I will soon need to find a more suitable place to raise them than in this basement, as they will grow quickly in size."

"Well, my time is already quite occupied, but I figure that I could help you find a new home for them. What kind of place would you need?"

"Something in an isolated area, where I could also hide my gravity craft and fly it in and out without attracting attention. Right now, my craft is still on the roof of this building, hidden in a canvas tent, but I really need a better place to hide it before some Humans spot it."

"Hum, an old abandoned hangar, or a disused mine, maybe. I will start looking around the hill country north of the city: houses are sparse in those hills and I heard that there are also abandoned gold mines dating back from the California Gold Rush of the Nineteenth Century."

"Such places would effectively be of interest to me. As for buying such a property, I have plenty of gold I brought from the Mount Fuji Hitoana Cave."

"Then, I will devote the little free time I have left to such a search, my friend. Uh, do your wyrmlings eat only meat?"

"Oh, no! They are actually omnivorous, but they especially like raw meat and fish. Right now, they will each eat about two pounds of meat or fish every day, but that quantity will increase quickly in the next weeks and months. They will attain their full adult size in about a hundred years and live on for about fifteen centuries or more."

"Fifteen centuries..." Said softly Patricia while staring at the wyrmlings. "It will be good for me to have steady companions for this long on this Material Plane. Be assured that I will be there to help and support them all that time, even after you are gone."

"You decidedly are a true friend, Patricia." Replied John, sincerely touched by her words. "Would you like to feed them a bit, so that they could start to get accustomed to you?"

"I would love it, John."

Stepping forward, Patricia took the bowl of minced meat offered by John, then shaped a small ball of meat with one hand before offering it in the palm of her left hand to Amaterasu, who eagerly gobbled it. She then did the same with Susano, repeating the process another time before giving back the bowl to John.

"You may continue to feed them, John. I am unfortunately quite busy these days, as one of my friends is facing some severe legal problems."

"I heard about it. If you need my help in that matter, don't hesitate to ask: I already owe you quite a few favors."

"What are friends for, if not to help each other?" Replied Patricia before teleporting out of the basement. John looked at the spot she had been, a bit envious about her ability to teleport like this. That certainly was one very practical power to possess.

15:53 (California Time)

Saturday, February 2, 1974

Murphy Ranch, Sullivan Ridge Fire Road, Rustic Canyon

Pacific Palisades District, northern Los Angeles suburbs

Having rolled slowly up the narrow canyon road meandering on top of a crest line in the hills north of Los Angeles, Patricia finally arrived at the location a local inhabitant she had met earlier on had told her about. The main gate of what was known as the 'Murphy Ranch' still had a rusty iron gate in place. It was however partially opened and

unlocked. Stepping out of her Firebird Trans-Am, Patricia pushed the gate open all the way, then got back in her car and rolled inside the property before stepping out again to close the iron gate behind her. With that done, she drove the short distance to the ranch house proper, a two-storey pink stucco building with a drive-through portico garage on one side. The house had obviously been deserted for many years, as it clearly showed utter neglect while its windows were boarded shut with plywood sheets. From what she had been told, she knew that the Murphy Ranch had been built around 1933 by pro-Nazi sympathizers, who had planned to make it a self-sufficient refuge and meeting place for their group, complete with auxiliary generator, water reservoir and gardens. However, the place had been raided by the police in December 1941, after Germany had declared war to the United States, and the pro-Nazi sympathizers had then been arrested. The place had been empty since then, as the rusting 'for sale' sign on the main gate showed.

Entering the main ranch house and exploring it, Patricia soon concluded that, while in need of some serious renovations and cleanup and being totally empty of furniture, it still was viable. Going out through the back, she went next to a large building fronted by an elevated concrete terrace and with a peaked roof. That building proved as empty as the first one but the outline of machinery bases on its concrete floor told Patricia that it had been the old power generator house. Next to it was a partially crumbled building, also empty. The next building she visited on the ranch turned out to be most interesting for her: it was a long, large and high-ceiling barn that had probably been meant to shelter horses.

"Well well, with some improvements and repairs to it, this would make a nice place for Susano and Amaterasu to grow up and shelter in." Patricia said to herself while looking up at the wooden roof, which seemed intact. Going out of the barn, she noticed a partially hidden steel door visible at the basement level of the main ranch house. Walking across a debris-strewn courtyard overgrown with vegetation, Patricia went to the steel door and, with a little effort, was able to turn its handle and open it, creating a noise of rusty metal. Going down a few steps, she ended in an obscure, empty concrete room measuring maybe fifty feet by twenty feet. By its stout construction, it was obvious that it had been meant to be some kind of bomb shelter. Another staircase at the opposite end opened inside the ranch house. Liking this place more by the minute, Patricia was about to start taking a series of pictures of the ranch with the 35mm still camera she had brought with her but had a better idea.

Concentrating for a moment, she disappeared in the blink of an eye from the basement shelter. She was back nine minutes later with John Hideyoshi closely hugging her, having teleported with him from the 'Friends' Corner Bar'. Taking one step away from her, John looked around him in the dark shelter, using his natural night vision. Patricia spoke at once.

"This bomb shelter is situated just under the main ranch house. Let's use that staircase over there, so that you can visit the house."

"Play the guide for me, my friend." Said John, in a good mood.

The tour of the ranch together took a good hour, with John asking Patricia to take pictures of the various buildings and grounds so that he could have the cost of renovating the place evaluated later. Their last visit was to the main bedroom on the upper floor of the ranch house, from which they were able to admire through a window the view of the distant Malibu and Santa Monica coastline to the South. John nodded his head, visibly satisfied.

"This place is perfect. It is isolated from other houses and can be turned into a self-sufficient refuge and hiding place for my two dragons and my gravity craft. I will however have to build a higher perimeter fence, to stop hikers and other impromptu visitors from wandering in."

"I know: I saw the graffiti they painted on the various buildings of the ranch. I would also counsel you to remove the trees and shrubs within at least a hundred feet from the property lines, to protect the ranch from forest and brush fires. Such fires are frequent around here in the Summer months. You also should be aware that a high voltage power line passes by a bit to the north of here. Susano and Amaterasu will need to be careful not to approach it. Finally, there is a military missile and radar site on top of a hill, a couple of miles to the north."

John gave an amused look at those last words.

"Could it be the site from which they fired a missile at us when we were coming back from Japan in my gravity craft?"

"That's very possible, John. What it means is that you will have to fly low to avoid detection by that radar."

"I will be careful, my friend, I promise. As for Susano and Amaterasu, I will make sure that they understand where not to go."

That made Patricia giggle.

"For young kids, that's the best way to ensure that they WILL go to those places, John."

John sighed deeply in response.

"I know! Something tells me that I will be impossibly busy in the next months and years. Life will never be the same for me from now on."

Patricia gave him a tender smile while caressing the back of his head.

"But it will all be for a good cause. Your race now has a future beyond you on Earth. Maybe you will have grand-children before you pass away."

"That would be something I would dearly love to see, Patricia." Said softly John as he still stared at the coastline in the distance.

The next weeks and months went by in a blur for both John and Patricia. While John was able to quickly buy the Murphy Ranch for a reasonable price and then initiated at once extensive renovations on it, using the services of a building contractor he knew well, Patricia was kept busy by her university studies, her evening work at the 'Pussycat Cabaret' and her frequent, alternate dates with Peter Horowitz and Robert Purnell, plus occasional stints as impromptu babysitter for Susano and Amaterasu. Then came the time she and Robert Purnell had been expecting with trepidation and nervousness: Robert's day in court.

CHAPTER 7 – DELICIA’S JUSTICE

09:04 (California Time)

Thursday, July 25, 1974

Courtroom Number Six, Los Angeles District Municipal Court

Hall of Justice Building, North Spring Street

Downtown Los Angeles, California

“ALL RISE FOR THE HONORABLE JAMES RITTER, OF THE LOS ANGELES DISTRICT MUNICIPAL COURT!”

The crowd nearly filling the courtroom’s spectators benches got up, along with Robert Purnell and Vance Sterling. Sylvia/Delicia had come early and had thus been able to secure a place at one end of the bench directly behind the defense table, next to the central aisle of the courtroom. She gave an encouraging smile to a very nervous Robert as they all sat back with the permission of Judge Ritter. Ritter then had the court clerk read the charges against Robert before looking at the young man.

“Robert Purnell, do you still plead not guilty to those charges, as you did on January the Seventeenth?”

“I do, Your Honor!”

“Then, the Court Clerk will register this not guilty plea as confirmed.”

Vance Sterling, who had stood up at the same time as Robert, then followed up at once.

“Your Honor, before this trial proceeds with examining the charges against my client, I would like to petition this court in order to have two of the accusations thrown out as being without merit.”

As Vance was speaking, Sylvia was directing a silent ‘Charm’ spell at Judge Ritter, to make him most sympathetic to Robert Purnell’s cause. Ritter thus didn’t deny Vance’s request out of hand, to the prosecutor’s outraged disbelief.

“What are those two accusations and on what grounds do you wish them to be thrown out, Mister Sterling?”

“The accusations of aggravated assault causing bodily harm against a police officer and of resisting arrest, Your Honor. The recent judgment about the class action suit made against the Police Department of Los Angeles...”

"OBJECTION, YOUR HONOR!" Shouted William Stone, the prosecuting attorney, seeing where Vance wanted to go concerning the two most serious accusations against Robert Purnell. "THAT JUDGMENT IS IRRELEVANT TO THIS CASE."

In response, Ritter banged his gavel once to shut up Stone, then looked severely at both Stone and Sterling.

"The two attorneys will now approach the bench."

Taking with him a document, Vance walked to the judge's bench, stopping right against it, while William Stone did the same on the left of him. Ritter then spoke to Vance in a near whisper, so that the members of the jury could not hear what he said.

"Please tell me about that class action suit, Mister Sterling."

"Your Honor, as I was about to say out loud, I am referring to the court judgment rendered two days ago in the case of the class action suit filed by the customers and staff of the 'Surfers' Karaoke Bar' against the L.A.P.D. and the City of Los Angeles, concerning the police raid at the bar last Christmas. That class action suit claimed that this raid, made without a proper warrant and based on frivolous allegations, was conducted with excessive use of force, resulting in the mass violation of the rights of the customers and staff members who were then present. The court has ruled against the city and the L.A.P.D. in that case, concluding that the police raid had violated constitutional rights of assembly, liberty and safety and had been marked by the blatant use of excessive force by the police and by the wrongful arrest of 58 persons, with the police also refusing medical treatment for the persons arrested. The city has thus been condemned to pay a total of five million dollars in damages to the suit's signatories. Here is the copy of the said judgment, Your Honor."

As Ritter, who had heard already loud echoes from that judgment, took the document offered by Vance and started reading it, Stone protested in a low voice.

"Your Honor, the facts are that this Robert Purnell did strike a policeman during that raid, then resisted arrest."

"Facts not yet in evidence, Your Honor! Those accusations were based on the words of police officers who have just been found guilty of use of excessive force and of making wrongful arrests. I am ready to build a case against those two accusations, based on the findings of that court judgment."

"You are free to argue your points about those accusations, Mister Sterling. Let the jurors hear about that judgment. Mister Stone, this preceding judgment does blow a

rather big hole in your argumentation to come. Do you still want to proceed with the two accusations being contested by Mister Sterling?"

"I do, Your Honor!"

"Very well! You may both return to your seats."

Ritter waited for both attorneys to be back behind their tables before looking at Vance.

"Mister Sterling, you may now expose your reasons for wishing to have the accusations of aggravated assault causing bodily harm to a police officer and of resisting arrest thrown out."

"Thank you, Your Honor!"

As Vance was basically repeating for the benefit of the jurors what he had said to Ritter, Sylvia threw a silent 'Mass Suggestion' spell at the jurors, inciting them to treat with antipathy and disbelief the police version of the raid on the bar. When the time came for William Stone to refute Vance's arguments, he faced twelve unsympathetic jurors who stayed cold to his own arguments. Feeling bad already about this trial, Stone then called in his first witness, one of the police officers who had participated in the raid against the gay bar. As the policeman, wearing his uniform and badge, sat in the witness' chair, Sylvia hit him with an 'Idiocy' spell, temporarily diminishing his intelligence, wisdom and charisma by a measurable degree.

'Let this moron look like the moron he is!' Thought Sylvia, a smirk on her lips. The prosecutor then approached the policeman, counting on him to help nail Robert's coffin.

"Please state your name and function, Officer."

"I am Agent Steve MacIntyre, of the Los Angeles Police Department's Vice Squad."

"Were you present when the 'Surfers' Karaoke Bar' was raided on the night prior to Christmas of 1973?"

"Yes, I was!"

"What was your role in that raid?"

Hit by a 'Suggestion' spell from Sylvia, the policeman smiled as he recounted his actions of the night, bragging proudly about them.

"I was one of the first officers to enter that queers' bar, sir. Boy, did I have fun hammering those degenerates with my baton! One of them dared to slug me as I was teaching a good lesson to his dance partner, so I and four of my comrades then beat that fag to a pulp."

As Judge Ritter and the jurors stared at him with scandalized looks, the policeman continued on, to the horror of William Stone.

"When that fag passed out, I gave him a few more baton strikes to break his nose and split his lips..."

"That will be enough, Officer MacIntyre!" Said a bit too late Stone. "I am finished with that witness, Your Honor."

Ritter gave him a sardonic look before addressing Vance Sterling.

"Mister Sterling, do you have questions for that witness?"

"I certainly do, Your Honor!" Replied Vance, who could not believe his luck. Making a show of calmly getting up and walking to the witness box, Vance looked down and smiled to the policeman, hoping to entice that moron into continuing to cut his own throat.

"Officer MacIntyre, could you designate to me the so-called 'fag' who slugged you and who you then beat up?"

"Yeah! That would be that big queer over there." Answered the policeman while pointing at Robert Purnell. Vance then looked at the jurors.

"Let the court know that Officer MacIntyre has designated my client by using the term 'queer'."

He then returned his attention on the still oblivious policeman.

"Officer MacIntyre, you said earlier that you beat up the dance partner of my client before you got hit yourself. Did that dance partner hit you or tried to hit you before or after you hit him?"

"No! He just happened to be the first in my path, so I started with him."

"And started what, exactly?"

"But, to beat some morality into those queers, of course!"

"So, that man never hit you, correct?"

"Uh, correct."

"Did you tell him that he was under arrest, and for what reasons?"

"Why waste time on that?" Protested MacIntyre, as if his actions had been completely justified. By then, Judge Ritter was shifting in his chair, becoming red with indignation, while the jurors exchanged scandalized looks.

"So, you never told him that he was under arrest or why?"

"That's right, sir!"

"Did one of your comrades tell that man or my client that they were under arrest, and for what reasons?"

"No! We had over fifty fags filling that bar and we were too busy to talk with them."

"Busy doing what?"

"But, teaching them a lesson, of course!"

"I see! By the way, did you know that my client, whom you called a 'queer', has a girlfriend named Sylvia Thorne?"

"How could a queer have a girlfriend?" Replied MacIntyre, his diminished intelligence unable to see the trap that was closing on him. Vance smiled at his question.

"Exactly! Miss Thorne, could you please stand up?"

Sylvia stood up at once from her bench, plainly visible in full to the jurors and resplendent with female beauty and sexiness. Vance let the jurors look at Sylvia for a few seconds before speaking again.

"Miss Sylvia Thorne, the girlfriend of my client, has been frequenting Mister Purnell for over a year now and knows him intimately. This makes evident the fact that my client is no homosexual, contrary to the assumptions of Officer MacIntyre, who used his assumptions to justify attacking, beating and then arresting my client."

Now feeling quite confident about the outcome of the trial, Vance faced directly the jurors as the reporters present in the courtroom were frantically writing down notes in their notepads.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I believe that this testimony amply proves the fact that the police acted with reckless and excessive violence towards the patrons and staff of the 'Surfers' Karaoke Bar', assaulting them without legal justifications and making wrongful arrests motivated solely by prejudice, violating in the process their constitutional rights to happiness, liberty, safety and privacy, rights that were added to the State Constitution this year through an amendment voted by the California voters. I thus plead to you to find that the charges of aggravated assault and resisting arrests are baseless and that the police wrongfully arrested my client."

"The jury will reserve judgment on that until the final testimonies and arguments have been made in this trial." Said Judge Ritter, who then looked at William Stone. "Do you wish to counter-interrogate this witness, Mister Stone?"

"No, Your Honor!" Answered the prosecutor while throwing a dark look at MacIntyre, who still sat in the witness chair, a stupid smile on his face.

"Then, the witness is excused!"

As the policeman walked out of the courtroom, followed by the eyes of many in the audience, Robert twisted his head to look at Sylvia, who blinked one eye in response. Now much less nervous, Robert concentrated his attention back on the prosecutor, who was now quite at a loss about how to repair the catastrophic damage to his case done by MacIntyre's testimony.

With Sylvia liberally throwing spells at the witnesses called forward by Stone during the next two hours, the prosecutor's case was all but cut to shreds by noon hour, with a discouraged Stone uncertain what to do next, having run out of credible witnesses and having possessed from the start little to no actual physical evidence supporting the charges against Robert Purnell. By contrast, Vance Sterling was able to present the photos taken at the police station of the 58 men arrested in the bar, all of whom showed heavily battered faces and bleeding head wounds, while none of the policemen participating in the raid had been truly wounded, thus demonstrating to the jury the extent to which the police had used excessive force during the raid. After a one hour lunch break, the trial resumed but came quickly to an end when Stone declared that he had no more witnesses or evidence to produce for the prosecution. Vance Sterling, sensing that the time was now perfect to put an end to that farce, motioned for the trial to pass to the phase of the final arguments, to which Judge Ritter agreed, adjourning the trial until the next morning. Robert Purnell was jubilant as he left the courtroom with Sylvia and Vance, pursued by a crowd of reporters who wanted their opinions on what had happened in court.

The television nightly news across the nation and the newspapers on the next day had a field day with the story of the trial, with the L.A.P.D. being trashed for its demonstrated brutality and prejudices. The trial started again at about nine in the morning, at which time both the prosecution and the defense presented their final arguments, followed by the instructions to the jury given by Judge Ritter. The jurors then retired to deliberate, but came back in the courtroom after less than two hours of deliberations. Robert Purnell stood up straight and took a deep breath as Judge Ritter addressed the jurors.

"Has the jury come to a verdict?"

"Yes, Your Honor!" Answered the senior juror.

"And what is your verdict?"

"Not guilty on all counts, Your Honor."

Sylvia/Delicia, genuinely happy and relieved, approached at once Robert, hugging and kissing him as Judge Ritter banged his gavel to bring quiet back in the courtroom.

"Silence, please! Silence!... I thus declare the accused innocent of all charges laid against him in this case. Court Clerk, let the court's archives reflect that judgment. Mister Robert Purnell, you are now a free man."

As Robert exchanged a happy handshake with Vance Sterling, Ritter made a sign for William Stone to approach his bench. Stone, guessing what was coming, walked gloomily to the bench, where Ritter pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Mister Stone, I was expecting a lot more professionalism from both your office and from the Los Angeles Police Department in this case. This trial was a farce and an insult to true justice and the blame is squarely on the prosecution for this. As for those goons from the Vice Squad, they better not be surprised if they are hit in the coming days with legal and political consequences as a result of their excesses. Now, get out of my court!"

On the sidewalk outside the Hall of Justice Building, Robert and Sylvia exchanged an ultimate handshake with Vance Sterling.

"I can't thank you enough for defending me, Mister Sterling. You did a superb job!"

"Well, to be frank, I was helped quite a lot by the incompetence of the opposing side, Mister Purnell. They mostly dug their own grave early on in the trial."

"You still were able to fully exploit their mistakes, Mister Sterling." Said Sylvia. "I will bring the last part of your fees tomorrow, if that is okay with you."

"Tomorrow will be just fine, Miss Thorne. Talking of fees, I believe that you forgot about something quite important."

"Oh, what exactly?"

"Remember that class action suit brought by the patrons and staff of the 'Surfers' Karaoke Bar' against the city? The suit that the city lost, with five million dollars to pay as a punitive cost."

"What about it?"

"Well, Mister Purnell here happens to be one of the 58 claimants on that suit. Once the legal fees of my associates have been taken from that five million dollars, that leaves each individual claimant with about 80,000 dollars. I fully expect the city to appeal that verdict, but I am confident that Mister Purnell will eventually get his part of the settlement."

Robert could only stare at him for a moment, joy on his face.

"EIGHTY THOUSAND DOLLARS?! But, that will allow me to pay for all my studies and to buy both a house and a car."

"And you amply deserved that, Robert." Said softly Sylvia before kissing him on the lips. Vance looked on with approval as the couple embraced each other.

"And they called you a homosexual! Mind you, even if you were one, I wouldn't mind one bit...as long as you wouldn't try to grab my ass."

"What if I tried to grab your ass, Vance?" Said sneakily Sylvia, making the lawyer grin.

"Sorry: I would rather not incriminate myself in front of your huge boyfriend." Sylvia and Robert laughed at that.

"You are a good man, Mister Sterling." Said Sylvia. "It was a pleasure to know you."

"And it was a pleasure to know you two. Have a good day!" The couple watched the lawyer go, then looked at each other, smiling.

"So, what's next?" Asked Robert.

"What's next is a ride to my apartment, where I will screw you silly. After that, we will go eat in the best restaurant in town, and that will be on me."

"Where do you get all that money, Sylvia, really?"

"Don't ask!" Was Sylvia's answer.

CHAPTER 8 – A HELL OF A PARTY

14:23 (California Time)

Wednesday, August 7, 1974

Basement of the 'Friends' Corner Bar'

Little Tokyo District, Los Angeles

"So, what is it that you wanted to show me down here, Patricia?" Asked John Hideyoshi as Patricia led him inside the main basement room of his bar, where the confinement cells for out-of-control lycanthropes were. Only then did he see that Harold McMasters, one of the regular patrons of his bar and also a very powerful Human magician, was present in the basement.

"Harry? What is going on?"

"Me and Patricia prepared a nice surprise and a gift for you, John. Now that the building contractor and his workers have finished renovating the Murphy Ranch and now that it is ready for occupation, we thought that you could use a way to travel more easily and quickly between the ranch and the bar. If you will follow me to that new separate room that Samuel Jennings built on our directives in that far corner."

Still not having a clue about what Patricia and Harold had been up to, John followed them to a corner of the basement where a freshly built internal annex now stood, encroaching on the original floor space of the basement. Its concrete block walls went all the way up to the concrete ceiling and it was closed off by a steel door with a mechanical lock and door handle. With Harold opening the door and switching on an internal overhead light, John was able to look inside an utterly empty space measuring maybe fifteen feet wide by forty feet deep. Two painted circles on the floor, each ten feet in diameter, one green and the other red, were the only things inside that caught John's eyes. The nearest circle to the door was the green one, with the limit of the red one five feet beyond the green one.

"Uh, I don't get it. Why block a quarter of my basement's floor space just to build an empty room?"

"To avoid that someone accidentally steps inside those circles, John." Answered Patricia, grinning with malice. "Why don't you go walk to the middle of the red circle?"

"If you wish so, Patricia, but I really don't see what this is all about."

"Just step inside the red circle, John."

"Alright! I hope that this is not some kind of prank." Said John while walking towards the red circle at the far end of the new room. He felt a strange tingle the moment he crossed into the circle, then the world around him seemed to change in a flash once he got to the center of the circle. Totally disoriented at first, he looked around him at the windowless, concrete room he was now in. There were a few pieces of brand new furniture and a number of large steel storage cabinets and shelves along the walls, plus three overhead neon lights that illuminated the room. Looking down at his feet, John saw that he was standing in the middle of a large green circle painted in an empty corner of the room, with a chain barrier surrounding it, apparently to prevent someone from accidentally stepping inside the circle. Another, similarly chained-off circle, a red one, was situated in the opposite corner of the room. He then recognized where he was now: he was standing in the main underground bomb shelter situated under the ranch house of the Murphy Ranch! Understanding finally coming to him, John gingerly walked through the gap in the perimeter chain of the green circle and went to the red circle, passing its chain gate and stepping inside the circle. Again, the world changed in a flash around him and he found himself back in the basement of his bar, inside the newly-built room, with Patricia and Harold grinning while staring at him.

"Teleportation circles? Linking the bar with the Murphy Ranch?"

"That's right!" Said Patricia, enjoying the surprise she and Harold had sprung on John. "I activated two teleportation circles, one transporting persons from the bar to the ranch and the other transporting persons from the ranch to the bar. The red circles mark the departure spots, while the green circles mark the arrival spots. Once you arrive inside a green circle, you however have to step out of it, to leave space for others to possibly follow you. Harry helped me with his magical powers by putting a 'Permanency' spell on my 'Teleportation Circle' spells. You now have a permanent, instant and discrete transportation link between the bar and the ranch, something that will help you greatly to take care and raise your two wyrmlings in safety at the ranch." Overwhelmed with joy, John then hugged Patricia and kissed her repeatedly before also hugging Harold.

"Thank you my friends! Thank you! This is a priceless gift to me on your part and it will indeed make it much easier for me to care for Susano and Amaterasu. How could I ever repay you for this?"

"By continuing to be the kind and generous person you are, John." Replied Harold McMasters. "With these teleportation circles now in place, I believe that you will need someone to stay permanently at the ranch, to keep watch over it and also to maintain it. I would thus suggest that you formally hire Cyndie Strutters as the cleaning maid for the ranch, while Brian Winslow could be your night security guard and Samuel Jennings could be both a day security guard and a handyman that would help maintain the buildings of the ranch."

John thought those words over for a moment. Cindy Strutters was actually a vampire, having been bitten at a young age 35 years ago, but was of modest means, working as a night janitor to support herself. Despite her terrible condition, she was basically a decent person and, with the help and support of John, who provided fresh human blood to her via a legal blood bank, had not bitten another Human in years and had vowed never to do it again. Brian Winslow was also a vampire, but one with a much longer history, having been bitten in 1756 at the age of 23. Resolved to never bite other Humans again, he was presently living as a lonely, dirt-poor homeless man, coming to the 'Friends Corner Bar' to feed on human blood legally collected by John and also to find some company in his long, lonely and grim existence. As for Samuel Jennings, a mason and bricklayer by trade, he was actually a werewolf. As such, he could be quite chaotic and brutal by nature, but John's influence had greatly mellowed him and he was now mostly in control of his terrible curse and disease, being able to withstand the physical urge to turn into a wolf at every full moon period.

"These are good suggestions, my friend. I will speak to Cindy, Brian and Samuel as soon as they come again to the bar. Again, thank you so much to you and Patricia."

"It was a pleasure, John. Now that this has been arranged, why don't we go back to my mansion, Patricia, so that I could teach you a few new magical tricks?"

"Why not? Hang on!"

Gluing herself to the magician, Patricia then disappeared with him, vanishing into thin air. John shook his head with amusement at that fresh display of Patricia's ability to teleport around.

"I really wish that I could do that: such a practical power to have."

21:46 (California Time)

Patricia Love's house

Lindbrook Drive, Westwood District

Patricia was quite satisfied about her latest magical training session with Harold McMasters when she teleported back to her house in Westwood. She had started in the last few months to experiment with him in the creation of a number of brand new spells of her own design, spells meant to deal with the ever growing influence on Humans of their various advancing technologies. One technology in particular that was worrying Patricia in the long run was that of computers. While still bulky, slow and primitive in 1974, computers were being improved steadily and at an ever faster rate. One aspect of life on the Material Plane in which computers were going to impact her severely was Patricia's need to adopt new personas every few decades, building up a new identity and life when an adopted personae became officially too old. In the 1930s and 1940s, it had been easy enough for her to adopt new identities as needed, but this was becoming harder and more complicated as the years went by. A forged passport and birth certificate was not going to be enough anymore in a few years, at the rate with which government data on its citizens was being archived and cross-linked by various agencies, including police and administrative ones. Things like tax returns, medical records, school records, criminal records, home-buying or renting contracts, insurance contracts and work records all were soon going to need to be extensively manipulated by Patricia if she wished to avoid having some nosey government employee eventually stumble on some irregularity or lack of official records that could unmask her adopted identity as being false. On the other hand, starting to learn herself about this new, emerging computer technology could prove to be a wise move for her, as it would give her the skills needed to play with and manipulate that technology to her advantage.

Climbing up the staircase of her basement, which she normally used to teleport in a discrete way, she went to her lounge, intent on watching the latest news on her television set. Telecommunications was another type of Human technology that was affecting more and more her life on the Material Plane: when coupled with the emerging computer technology, it now allowed employees of governments to send instantly around the World information that could possibly compromise her fake identity and expose her to official investigations that would force her to answer questions to which she had no valid answers. On the other hand, being able to learn quickly about various types of scandals and controversies around the country and around the World had helped her a number of time to zero in on hypocrites who deserved to be exposed and

punished. Making first a detour to her kitchen, Patricia took out of her refrigerator a chilled bottle of a fruity rosé wine she particularly liked and filled a glass. As a demon, she didn't have true needs to eat, drink or even sleep, but she could do all of that in order to appear like a normal human being. Tasty food and nice drinks, while not necessary for her sustenance, did appeal to her highly developed senses of taste and smell and she was partial to a good wine or spirit. What was the point of having good things around in life if you didn't enjoy them?

Making sure first that the curtains of her lounge were fully pulled close, so that nobody could spy on her, Patricia was about to go switch on her television set when she saw the sheet of parchment lying on top of the low table set in front of her big sofa. Viewed with normal vision, it looked like a blank piece of parchment but, when using her ability to see and read magic scripts, she could see a text in glowing red letters on it. Careful not to touch the parchment, Patricia approached it and examined it, but she detected no magical traps or runes that could hurt her. She then read the text on it, careful not to read it out loud.

The Lord of the Abyss, the great and magnificent Lucifer, along with his favorite concubine, Lilith, is inviting the illustrious Delicia to a party in his palace of Malefacta on Infernus and would be honored by her presence.

If you accept the invitation, simply wish to be transported to Malefacta and the ring the great Lucifer gifted you with will then carry you to the Abyss. Bring this invitation with you in order to gain entry to Malefacta.

At the bottom of the text was the seal of Lucifer. Patricia felt instant enthusiasm after reading the text and seeing Lucifer's seal: being invited to a party hosted by the master of Hell was a great honor for any demon. All thoughts of watching the news on television forgotten, she thought for a moment about what she could bring as a coming gift for Lucifer. Remembering something Lucifer had told her the first and only time he had visited her with Lilith at his side nearly a year ago, Patricia went to the bar set in one corner of her lounge and opened its storage cabinet, taking out a bottle of old Glen Grant malt scotch she had bought some time ago at a specialty alcohol store in Santa Monica. That bottle had cost her a pretty penny, as that particular year and brand of scotch had

won world prizes at a number of prestigious spirits contests. The bottle was still in its original box, intact.

“That should do as a small gift to Lucifer. Now, what should I wear?”

That last question was easily answered: from her souvenirs as a little demon girl growing in Hell, she knew that most demons went around naked all the time, with only a few high-level demons occasionally wearing some kinds of ceremonial pieces of clothing. Going upstairs to her bedroom, Patricia took off all her clothes and laid them on her bed, then walked to the full length mirror set against a wall. Concentrating for a moment, she shape-shifted to her natural demon form of Delicia, then admired herself in the mirror. She now stood a full six feet and two inches-tall, with a sensual body, large firm breasts, reddish-brown skin that was as smooth as baby skin, a face of incredible beauty, long black hair and a pair of small horns on her forehead. Her eyes shone a fiery red, while a pair of large, black feathery wings spread out of her back.

“You are now ready to party, girl.”

Not forgetting about the bottle of scotch or the parchment, she went down to her lounge and kitchen, retrieving the two items before standing in the middle of her lounge and touching the ring Lucifer had given her.

“Great Ring of Infernal Protection, may you bring me to your creator.”

The world around her instantly turned to black oblivion as she vanished from her lounge and jumped planes.

The Present (Abyssal Time)

Main gate of Malefacta, on Infernus (Ninth Layer of Hell)

Abyssal Realm (Hell)

Delicia reappeared about fifty yards in front of a set of monumental double gate doors built into tall walls made of black obsidian stone. Taking a deep breath to control her emotions at returning for the first time to a place she had to flee from 42 years ago to save her life, she looked around her to embrace her new surroundings. The sky looked like any normal sky on the Material Plane, with a thick cover of clouds overhead, but with a lower light illumination than for a normal Earth day. The country around her was hilly and generally covered with long grass and bushes, but with no trees visible. In the distance, she could see numerous volcanoes, many of them spewing smoke and ashes continuously, along with steaming lakes of hot thermal sources. The place actually

looked a lot like Iceland in the Summer on a cloudy day and could be said to have its charms. Also visible in the distance were a number of dispersed dwellings made of black, volcanic stone, with silhouettes moving around them. Delicia then concentrated her attention towards the gate, which was guarded by four huge Balors, powerful demons with red skin and clawed hands which presently held big greatswords. She started calmly walking towards the Balors until one of them spoke in Abyssal, making her stop.

“HALT! WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS?”

“My name is Delicia and I came here on invitation from our great lord himself. Here is my invitation.”

The senior Balor took the parchment presented by Delicia and studied it for a moment before giving it back to her while bowing.

“You may pass, Delicia.”

“Thank you!”

The Balor raised an eyebrow at her reply: polite greetings and thanks were not common in the Abyssal Realm, where a ‘fuck you’ was a more common form of response, sometimes having actually a friendly meaning. He however let her walk past him and gave a magical order that made the big gate doors open by themselves. Walking through the open gate, Delicia found herself going down a large avenue lined with buildings built of obsidian stone. From the number of big, armed demons coming in and out of these buildings, she deduced that they had to be some kind of barracks housing part of Lucifer’s army. Continuing down the avenue, she crossed the intersection with another avenue that formed a circle inside the walls of Malefacta. There, the types of the population and buildings changed, the demons there being of a more varied kind and with quite a few Succubus visible in the lot. Those Succubus, along with many of the other demons she passed by, looked crossly at her, noting her unusual chaotic neutral aura, which contrasted with the evil aura of the inhabitants of the fortress. One of those Succubus, a high-ranking one judging by the number of minions following her, stepped in front of her, squarely blocking her path.

“What kind of failed demon are you, to dare come here in Malefacta with such a sickly aura?”

“That’s none of your concern, bitch!” Replied Delicia, making the other Succubus glow. “I am a guest of our lord, the great Lucifer, and I am here on his invitation. Now, step aside before I kick your ass to the curb.”

While clearly angered by Delicia's words, the Succubus did step aside, as interfering with Lucifer's business or guests was never a good idea in Malefacta. Delicia further angered her by giving her the royal finger while walking away.

"I will get you soon enough, you young cunt!" Promised the Succubus to herself before continuing on her business.

After passing the intersections of three more concentric ring avenues, Delicia finally arrived in a large, open air plaza surrounding a big, magnificent palace made of polished obsidian. The whole palace formed an enclosed building, which meant that no intruder could come in simply by flying. The palace walls were exquisitely decorated with intricate carvings and etchings and made for a truly beautiful sight.

"So much for the so-called ugliness of Hell." Said Delicia to herself as she walked towards the nearest visible gate of the palace. There, one of the four armed Balors on guard duty checked again her invitation before opening the doors. Inside, an elegantly dressed demon wearing a rich cape greeted her with a polite bow.

"Welcome to Malefacta, Mistress Delicia. Our lord was expecting you. My name is Lauris, Chamberlain of the Lord of the Abyss."

That greeting made Delicia raise an eyebrow: 'Mistress' was a title usually reserved for some of the most powerful of female demons.

"Mistress Delicia? I am decidedly more infamous than I expected, Lauris."

"You are indeed a somebody, Mistress Delicia." Replied the thin, nearly ascetic demon, an amused smile on his mouth. "Your exploits on the Material Plane have made many talk about you here, including quite a few jealous ones."

Delicia nodded her head, both in acknowledgement and in understanding. Lauris had meant his words to be as much a warning as a compliment, something very frequent in the Abyss, where jealousy and envy ran rife. To call the Abyss 'a nest of backstabbers' would have been a gross understatement indeed. The chamberlain then pointed down the hallway they were in.

"If you will please follow me, Mistress Delicia, I will lead you to the Throne Room."

She followed with good grace the chamberlain down the long hallway, which was decorated with statues, vases made of semi-precious gems and other art objects that would have excited the greed of many thieves on the Material Plane. However, stealing from the Lord of the Abyss was one sure way to end in a very bad predicament.

Pushing open a large set of double doors at the end of the hallway, Lauris walked in a vast room with a high, domed ceiling half-covered with colorful stained-glass windows that gave the place the appearance of some kind of cathedral. The floor was made of highly polished black obsidian, while the walls were made of engraved obsidian and jade decorated with inlaid imitations of vine leaves made of gold, with precious gems inserted in the leaves. There were also numerous statues and art works along the walls. The whole made for a truly resplendent place, but with a sober kind of beauty to it. Lauris then banged three times the tip of his ceremonial staff on the stone floor before shouting out loud.

“MISTRESS DELICIA, OF LOS ANGELES ON THE MATERIAL PLANE!”

The dozens of demons present in the hall stopped discussing between themselves on hearing that and turned around to all stare with curiosity at Delicia. Delicia looked around her only briefly before advancing towards a dais set at one end of the hall, where Lucifer sat with Lilith at his side. Here in the Abyss, Lucifer appeared like a young man of stunning physical beauty who stood about ten feet-high, with a pair of large black feathery wings in his back, a pair of large horns on his forehead and pale brown skin. He wore nothing except for a few rings and other jewels, including a gold crown of intricate design, while he held a golden scepter in one hand. Delicia couldn't help feel lust fill her as she admired the Master of Hell in all his splendor while she walked towards his throne. Lucifer evidently sensed her lust towards him, as he quickly built a tremendous erection while watching her approach the dais. Lilith, who was as naked as Lucifer and Delicia were, gave the latter a warm maternal smile while at the same time using her left hand to fondle Lucifer's erect penis. Most Humans would have found that in very bad taste during an official ceremony, but that was actually part of the demonic way to express their embrace of total free will and open acceptance and display of all emotions. In the Abyss, if you felt like you wanted to have sex with someone, you let it show and waited for the response, good or bad. More often than not, either the target of the lust would respond positively, or someone else nearby would step in with their own desires. There was of course the small fact that refusing the advances of a higher level demon could have consequences, mostly bad. As a Succubus, Delicia fully understood that game and wholly embraced it, as she had been created with lust and temptation as her main drives in life.

Delicia stopped once five feet away from the foot of the dais' stairs and put one knee down while bowing her head.

"O Great Lord of the Abyss, I was most honored by being invited to your party. Know that I will always be at your service."

"And your services have been most meritorious indeed, dear Delicia. I was mostly finished here with my daily audiences, so we will soon be able to move to the Party Hall."

"And I am most eager to participate fully in your party, My Lord." Said Delicia, thus announcing that she was fully open to all advances during that party and would not refuse anyone. "I have brought with me a small gift for you, so that you could enjoy yourself better."

She then presented her bottle of old scotch, still in its box. Using telekinesis, Lucifer made the box float out of her hands and fly towards him, grabbing it and taking the bottle out of it. Next, he unscrewed the cap and smelled the scotch. Smiling with approval, he snapped his fingers, making a female demon servant run up to him with a tray supporting a few glasses. Pouring for himself a half glass of scotch and also filling a glass for Lilith before giving it to her, Lucifer then smelled and sipped the scotch with obvious satisfaction.

"Aaah, that is a fine spirit indeed! STEP FORWARD, MY LOYAL LORDS OF THE NINE LAYERS, AND TASTE ONE OF THE THINGS THAT THE HUMANS OF THE MATERIAL PLANE DO BEST!"

As female servants scrambled to get more glasses, ten demons wearing jewels and capes came forward to the foot of the dais, flanking Delicia on both sides. Seven of them were male humanoids, while three were female. As his servants were pouring glasses of scotch for the waiting lords, Lucifer smiled to Delicia, who was still kneeling.

"Please get up, my dear Delicia, so that I could present to you my loyal lords."

"Thank you, My Lord!"

"First," said Lucifer while pointing a nine foot-tall humanoid demon with red skin and wearing a black cape, "may I present to you the Lord of Cania, the Eight Layer, Lord Mephistopheles."

"I am honored to meet you, Lord Mephistopheles."

"And so am I, Mistress Delicia. I heard about your exploits at the expense of hypocrites on the Material Plane."

"I only did what needed to be done, My Lord."

"Yes, but you did it in style."

Delicia bowed her head at the compliment as Lucifer presented the second lord in line.

"Next, here is the Lord of Maladomini, the Seventh Layer, Lord Baalzebul."

Delicia's eyes lit up on admiring the seven foot-tall male demon, who had an angelic body and face that would have made most Human women mad with desire. As a special salute to him, Delicia gently grabbed his huge penis and kissed its tip, making Baalzebul grin with anticipated pleasure. A tall Succubus standing slightly behind him however seemed to be less pleased by that, but didn't say a word.

"I am both honored and pleased to meet you, O beautiful Lord Baalzebul."

"Thank you, Mistress Delicia. I must say that you are of a rare beauty yourself, even for a Succubus."

"Thank you, Lord Baalzebul."

Delicia then moved to the next lord as Lucifer presented her.

"Here is the Lord of Malbolge, the Sixth Layer, Archduchess Glasya."

Glasya, a supremely beautiful woman with shiny copper skin, silvery wings, a forked tail and small horns, looked down rather coldly at Delicia as the latter did a curtsy in front of her.

"I am honored to meet you, Archduchess."

"So am I, Mistress Delicia."

Sensing some hostility from her, Delicia moved in front of a six foot-tall humanoid male with pale skin, dark hair, completely black eyes, pointed teeth and a goatee, who wore silken clothes and had a glistening rapier at his side.

"This is the Lord of Stygia, the Fifth Layer, Lord Levistus."

"Honored to meet you, Lord Levistus." Said Delicia, who was nearly at once turned off by the glacial arrogance of Levistus, who also seemed to be disliked by the other lords, who all kept some distance from him. Delicia then received a telepathic message from Lucifer.

"You would be wise to be careful around Lord Levistus, as well as with Archduchess Glasya, my dear Delicia. I myself keep both of them under constant watch."

"I will definitely heed your warning, O Great Lucifer." Thought back Delicia before speaking to Levistus.

"Honored to meet you, Lord Levistus."

In contrast to the other lords, Levistus didn't say a word then, simply nodding coldly his head. Delicia next moved in front of a couple of demons, one an older male and the other a clearly younger female, both with horns, wings and forked tails.

"Mistress Delicia, may I present to you the Lords of Phlegethos, the Fourth Layer, Lady Fierna and her father, Archduke Belial."

"I am honored to meet you, Lady Fierna, Archduke Belial."

Delicia was somewhat surprised to feel some coldness between the daughter and father, both also reacting differently to her, Belial with evident lust, Fierna with hidden suspicion. The next lord she stepped in front of turned out to be quite different from the other, humanoid-like lords. This one looked like a huge Gothic gargoyle with red leathery skin and wings. His magical aura was also very strong.

"The Lord of Minauros, the Third Layer, Lord Mammon." Said Lucifer before sending a telepathic message to Delicia.

'Careful with Mammon, Delicia. His followers on the Material Plane are very active and he is jealous of your actions there. He is also afraid that your fight to expose hypocrites could hurt some of the biggest followers of his cult of greed and lust.'

'I will keep your warning in mind, O Great Lucifer.' Mentally replied Delicia before speaking out loud.

"I am honored to meet you, Lord Mammon. I am most devoted to lust, as you may know."

"As should be a true Succubus. Your zeal in the matter pleases me most, Mistress Delicia."

"Thank you, My Lord."

By now, Delicia was starting to realize the degree of complexity and nastiness involved in the politics of the Abyss. She was especially stricken by how her actions on the Material Plane seemed to have resonated all the way to this plane. It now seemed that she was much more than just a lonely Succubus living in exile on the Material Plane. She next stepped in front of a giant-sized humanoid with dark hair and tiny horns. He wore resplendent silk garb embroidered with gold and held an intricately sculpted rod, while one of his two feet was cloven.

"The Lord of Dis, the Second Layer, Lord Dispater."

"Pleased to meet you, Lord Dispater." Said Delicia while bowing. She however took notice at the same time of a female demon standing close behind Dispater. She was wearing pieces of steel armor over her naked body and her eyes seemed to

embrace everything around her. Delicia somehow sensed that this female demon could well be more dangerous to her than Dispater himself, something that a telepathic message from Lucifer confirmed.

'That female demon is Lilis, Dispater's consort. She is also known as 'The Iron Maiden' and she runs his intelligence network, which extends even to the Material Plane. She is both very intelligent and knowledgeable and you may now become one of the targets of her spies. Be careful with her.'

'I will remember that, O Great Lucifer.'

The last lord she stepped in front of after that was another big, gargoyle-like demon, with a big sword at his side.

"The Lord of Avernus, the First Layer, Lord Bel. Lord Bel is also the head of my armies."

As Delicia bowed to him, Bel smiled down to her.

"I must thank you for those Japanese criminals, Yakuza members I believe, whom you sent to me some time ago: they turned out to be excellent soldiers for my armies."

"I was most pleased to send them your way, Lord Bel. I shall endeavor to send more of them to you in the future."

"That will be most appreciated, Mistress Delicia."

With the presentations over, Lucifer made a sign to his servants, who hurried to bring a glass of scotch to each of the lords and to Delicia.

"Well, now that you are all acquainted with Mistress Delicia, let's make a toast to her with this Human-produced spirit. Cheers!"

"CHEERS!" Replied the lords and Delicia before downing their scotch. Most of the lords seemed to like their drink, prompting Delicia in proposing something out loud.

"Maybe I could arrange to import more of this scotch to the Abyss, for the enjoyment of the great lords here."

"I second that!" Volunteered at once Baalzebul, who was licking his lips while looking at his glass. Quite pleased by now, Lucifer clapped his hands together twice to attract the attention of the crowd of demons in front of him.

"NOW THAT WE ARE FINISHED WITH OFFICIAL BUSINESS, LET'S MOVE TO THE PARTY HALL!"

A concert of cheers followed his announcement, with the demons present then waiting for Lucifer and Lilith to get up from their thrones and walk down from the dais before following the couple towards a set of large double doors in the wall behind the dais. Two big Balors pushed open those doors, revealing the inside of another big room, this one a lot more densely furnished than the Throne Room.

Following close behind the Lords of the Abyss, Delicia entered another large, round room with a domed ceiling. This room was however arranged in concentric rings on gradually higher levels as they got farther from the center, which was occupied by a large, deep pit. That reminded Delicia at once of the gladiator arenas of the old Roman Empire, where men and women fought and died for the entertainment of the spectators around them. However, instead of seats, each level had a number of couches resembling the couches used by the Romans during receptions and feasts, with low tables set in front of them. The central pit itself was a good ten feet deep and was about fifty feet in diameter. The whole room and central pit were built of black obsidian and jade, like the Throne Room, but was much more austere in its decoration. It was also quite grizzly, as numerous severed heads, which had apparently been preserved, were on display, stuck on wall hooks. Lucifer turned around to signal Delicia to follow him, which she did, going with him and Lilith to the severed head of what had been a giant humanoid demon with dark skin, black hair and a black goatee. Stopping in front of the displayed head, Lucifer pointed it to Delicia, a sober look on his face.

"This is the head of Asmodeus, my greatest enemy in the history of the Abyss. Once one of my most trusted lieutenants, Asmodeus led a rebellion against me, eons ago, in what was called the Great Uprising. It was a brutal and costly battle, but I eventually prevailed over Asmodeus and his army, helped by the lords who had stayed loyal to me. I defeated Asmodeus myself, killing him and cutting his head off. Now, it is on display for all to see, to both remind me of staying on my guard against traitors like him and to remind others not to cross me, ever."

Delicia stared at the head for a moment before turning to face Lucifer and putting one knee down while bowing her head.

"Be assured of my complete and eternal loyalty, O Great Lucifer."

"And I believe in it, my dear Delicia. Now, enough about all this political stuff. Let's party!"

Followed by a retinue of servants and courtesans, Lucifer led Lilith and Delicia to what were obviously couches reserved for the highest attendees, set on the ring level adjacent to the central pit. While Lilith chose to lay on a couch next to that of Lucifer, with a number of pretty and young Incubi⁷ around her, Delicia went to sit directly on Lucifer, impaling herself on his still erect huge dick. The master of the Abyss smiled as Delicia started grinding her hips around while moaning with pleasure. His right hand went to her clitoris and started manually stimulating it, while his left hand went to her left breast and nipple. After a minute or so of warming up, Delicia accelerated her grinding movement, while Lucifer started pounding her in and out at the rhythm and power of a jackhammer. Another two more minutes of that treatment and Delicia exploded in a powerful orgasm that left her panting and happy. Lucifer was however not finished with her, keeping drilling her with apparently inexhaustible energy and stamina. On a signal from him, two young Incubi approached Delicia and, kneeling in front of her, took on the job of licking her nipples and rubbing her clitoris while Lucifer concentrated on his drilling work. Delicia ended up exploding into delicious orgasms four more times during the next twenty minutes, at the end of which she pleaded to Lucifer while panting.

“P...please, I...I am spent!”

Lucifer stopped his hammering at once and gently kissed her on her neck before slowly withdrawing his still rock-hard penis from her vagina.

“You were great, my dear Delicia.”

He then surprised her by shouting out loud to the other demons around him, who had been also engaging in sex with various partners.

“MISTRESS DELICIA WENT FOR FIVE CONSECUTIVE ORGASMS AT MY HAND!”

The crowd of guests cheered loudly at that announcement, at least most of them that is. Notably unimpressed were Archduchess Glasya and another, very beautiful female demon with bat-like wings, long horns and a long tail tipped by a stinger. Lilith then approached Delicia and whispered in her ear.

“Getting up to five consecutive orgasms with Lucifer is quite a feat, my lovely daughter, and is something worthy of bragging about here in Malefacta. However, that also beats the best showing by Archduchess Glasya, who barely got to four orgasms in

⁷ Incubi : The male form of a Succubus.

a row despite all her powers. The other one not cheering you is Malcanthet, Queen of the Succubi. You just equaled her best performance with Lucifer.”

“Uh-oh! Should I watch for some kind of jealous rant?”

“A rant, no! What they will do instead is to consider and treat you as a potential rival. That is the more so with Malcanthet, who inherited her title of Queen of the Succubi from me and who despises me for being the favorite of Lucifer, even though I spawned her. As my daughter, you are even more of a rival to her now and she will probably think that you could be a treat to the cults on the Material Plane dedicated to her.”

“I see! Uh, what is next, now?”

“Next is normally the first fight of the day, followed by more sex and then another fight. As you can see, parties in the Abyss can be quite stimulating.”

“No kidding, Mother!”

“Another thing that you probably don’t know about parties held by Lucifer: it is considered in good taste to entertain as many of his guests as possible. Don’t concentrate on pleasing only Lucifer. He will both accept and approve if you go lie down with, say, Baalzebul, or even with some of the female guests: having fun is after all the main point of these parties. Don’t worry about neglecting Lucifer: I will take care of him.”

“Thanks, Mother! I was anyway eyeing Baalzebul already: he is a real eye candy.”

“That he is! Have fun, my dear daughter.”

Giving a last kiss and caress to Lucifer, Delicia then got up from his couch and walked in a sexy strut to the couch of Baalzebul, who was fondling his consort Baftis. The Lord of Maladomini watched her approach and gave her a wide grin as she was about to sit on his couch, next to Baftis.

“Aaah, the beautiful and meritorious Delicia from the Material Plane! You arrive just in time. I needed someone to accomplish some teamwork with me on my dear Baftis.”

“I will be happy to jump into the action, Lord Baalzebul.” Replied Delicia with a big smile before kneeling in front of Baftis and opening her legs, then bending down to start licking her clitoris. As Baftis was moaning with pleasure while playing with her consort’s penis, Baalzebul fondled her breasts and kissed her, inserting his tongue in her mouth. The female demon soon was jerking with spasms of pleasure, while her hands

went up and down Baalzebul's huge dick, rubbing it while she repeatedly licked it with her tongue. Both demons climaxed at nearly the same time, shouting out their pleasure. Baalzebul then gave Delicia, still kneeling between Baftis' legs, a fond smile.

"Such skilled services deserve a reward, my dear Delicia. Come sit on me while my servants join in on thanking you."

"With pleasure, My Lord!"

Positioning herself over Baalzebul's lap, Delicia then slowly lowered herself onto him. However, Baalzebul unexpectedly decided to ram her by her anus, making her hold her breath for a moment. As the Lord of the Seventh started pumping up and down, three female servants took position around Delicia, one to lick her clitoris and the two others licking her nipples and caressing her all over. At the same time, another servant girl, a very young teenager, started giving oral sex to Baftis as the latter watched Delicia's gangbang. Like Lucifer, Baalzebul went for multiple successive orgasms with Delicia, but he proved to have less staying power than the Master of Hell, actually giving up after Delicia's third orgasm and his own fourth orgasm. Fully satisfied, he stopped pumping up and down but let his dick inside her as the servants licked Delicia to her fourth orgasm. The group then unglued from each other, panting. Delicia however had ideas of her own still and pointed at the young teenage demon who had been licking Baftis to an orgasm.

"That young one seems to have talents for the art of pleasuring, My Lord. I would like to both reward and teach her here. Maybe you would like to join in on her."

"A fine idea, Delicia. Efritis, come here!"

"Yes My Lord!" Said the teenage demon girl, her eyes glittering with anticipated pleasure, before coming to sit on Baalzebul's lap. On her part, Delicia knelt between the girl's open legs and started making her tongue work, while two of the other servant girls joined in. The young demon ended up completely spent but mightily happy after enjoying a total of four consecutive orgasms, the last one thanks to Delicia's tongue work. As the young one lay panting in Baalzebul's lap, Delicia looked up at the latter, smiling.

"This young one definitely has a great potential, My Lord."

"I fully agree with you on this, my dear Delicia. Efritis, consider yourself now part of my permanent retinue of party girls."

"Thank you so much, My Lord! I will not disappoint you." Said the girl, genuinely happy, as this constituted a true promotion and a step to more important and rewarding things for a demon girl like her.

"I know that you won't Efritis. Talking about disappointing your lord, I believe that the first show of the party is actually a public punishment. Let's all sit down and enjoy the show."

Delicia gave the appearance of being eager to see that 'show' as she sat besides Baalzebul on his couch, with Baftis on the opposite side of her consort. The common demons were a generally cruel and selfish lot, but she was markedly different from those now surrounding her. While she was capable of being ruthless when needed, she did not normally enjoy watching someone else suffer. However, acting like a softie and a goodie-two-shoes here would not be a good idea. She thus painted an anticipating smile on her face as a beautiful female demon was dragged by two big Balors to the center of the pit surrounded by the guests to the party. Once there, the Balors held her firmly by the arms as a Lucifer's herald standing on the edge of the pit read from a parchment.

"OYE, OYE! MAY ALL KNOW THAT THE SUCCUBI NAMED SINAE, NOW PRESENT IN FRONT OF OUR GREAT LORD LUCIFER, COMMITTED THE FOLLOWING CRIMES: CONSPIRING AGAINST HER LEGITIMATE LORD, ARCHDUKE BELIAL; ATTEMPTING TO STEAL A PRECIOUS ARTIFACT FROM HER LORD AND SPYING ON HIM. OUR LORD LUCIFER WILL NOW PASS JUDGMENT ON THE SAID SINAE."

As Lucifer stared down hard on the accused Succubi, Baalzebul bent sideways to whisper in Delicia's ear.

"Know that there are widespread rumors and suspicions that this Sinae was actually working for Archduchess Glasya, who would love to see the demise of Belial. Some even say that Belial's own daughter, Lady Fierna, was involved in this plot." Delicia gave him a shocked look as Baalzebul sat back to watch Lucifer speak down to Sinae, who was shaking with fear.

"WHAT DO YOU SAY IN YOUR DEFENSE, SINAE? SPEAK!"

"MY LORD, I WAS ONLY ACTING ON ORDERS FROM PERSONS WELL ABOVE ME."

"WHO ARE THESE PERSONS?" Asked Lucifer, his eyes lighting up with anger.

"I...I WILL BE KILLED BY THOSE PERSONS IF I TELL YOU, MY LORD."

"YOU WILL BE KILLED ANYWAY IF YOU DON'T GIVE ME A REASON TO BE LENIENT WITH YOU. WOULD YOU RATHER BE TORTURED TO DEATH UNDER QUESTIONING?"

Sinae lowered her head as she shook like a leaf at that threat: if there was something demons were good at, it was at inflicting pain. She finally decided that, if she was going to be snuffed out, she might as well drag someone else down with her and pointed an accusing finger at Archduchess Glasya.

"I WAS WORKING FOR ARCHDUCHESS GLASYA AND WAS OBEYING HER ORDERS, MY LORD! SHE WANTED LORD BELIAL GONE."

"LIAR!" Shouted at once the Lord of the Sixth, jumping to her feet. "MY LORD, THAT GIRL IS LYING IN ORDER TO AVOID PUNISHMENT."

Lucifer gave the archduchess a skeptical look then.

"AND YOU WOULD PRETEND THAT SUCH A LOWLY SERVANT DEMON WOULD SCHEME ALL BY HERSELF AGAINST HER LORD, ARCHDUCHESS GLASYA? YOU ARE KNOWN TO BE HOSTILE TO LORD BELIAL. DON'T DENY IT!"

"AND SO ARE OTHER LORDS, NOTABLY LORD LEVISTUS, WHILE LORD BELIAL HIMSELF HAS BEEN SCHEMING AGAINST ME. BELIAL COULD HAVE TRICKED THIS SERVANT INTO THINKING THAT SHE WAS WORKING FOR ME, IN ORDER TO HAVE AN EXCUSE TO ACCUSE ME."

Lucifer was silent for a moment as he kept staring at Glasya. The infuriating point in this for him was that all that Glasya had said was actually true or possible. While his subordinate lords had not been conspiring against him lately, they still did plenty of conspiring against each other in order to gain more personal power, always at someone's expense. Without more proofs, he could not punish any of his lords without possibly causing grave disturbances through the Abyss. Lucifer thus turned to look down at Sinae, still being held by two balors.

"YOUR ACCUSATIONS WILL BE INVESTIGATED BY ME AFTER THIS PARTY. HOWEVER, THE FACT IS THAT YOU STILL WORKED AGAINST YOUR OWN LEGITIMATE LORD, SOMETHING THAT BY ITSELF DESERVES THE MOST SEVERE OF PUNISHMENTS. I CONDEMN YOU BE PUBLICLY FLOGGED, THEN TO BE FED INTO THE SOUL SHREDDER AS A LESSON TO ANYONE WHO WOULD THINK OF BETRAYING HIS OR HER LORD. GUARDS, TIE THE PRISONER TO THE PUNISHMENT POSTS...UPSIDE DOWN!"

As the naked prisoner was being dragged screaming and kicking towards two vertical posts separated by a distance of ten feet, Baalzebul again whispered to Delicia.

"In case you don't know, since you spent most of your life on the Material Plane, such public floggings implies that every guest to this party may be ordered by Lucifer to go down in the pit and administer a few lashes to the condemned. That's one way for him to judge someone's obedience and loyalty to him. You may thus be asked to go flog that Sinae. If so, don't refuse, for your own sake."

"Thank you for your advice and warning, My Lord." Said Delicia, her stomach now turning acid. She was no sadist but she would have no choice but to obey Lucifer if she didn't want to attract his personal ire, something that she couldn't afford right now.

With the unfortunate Sinea tied upside down and spread-eagled between the posts, exposing her naked groin to blows, Lucifer pointed at one of the guests on the first level.

"LORD BEL, BE THE FIRST TO PUNISH THIS CONSPIRATOR!"

"WITH PLEASURE, MY GREAT LORD!" Replied the big and powerful demon before jumping down in the pit, whose floor had risen by a few feet in order to be nearly level with the first row of couches. Taking a demonic whip from one of the guards, Bel then started lashing Sinae with all his strength, making her scream with pain. Delicia knew from personal experience that a whip held by a Human would cause only moderate pain to a demon like her. However, a demonic whip yielded by someone as strong as another demon would cause her at least as much pain and body damage as a Human would do to another Human with a normal whip. The unfortunate Sinae was thus reduced to a sobbing and bleeding wreck as demon lord after demon lord was called forward by Lucifer to administer punishment. Some, notably Archduchess Glasya, took special pleasure in lashing Sinae, concentrating their blows on her tender groin area and on her breasts. Delicia was dreading the moment when she would be called forward by Lucifer as Lady Fierna, the daughter of Archduke Belial, was about to start flogging the servant. Fierna however surprised the others around her by addressing the nearly unconscious Sinea.

"COME ON, GIRL! BE REASONABLE AND TELL US WHO YOU REALLY WORKED FOR."

As the weak Sinea tried to say something in a nearly inaudible voice, Fierna made a show of crouching down next to her head, apparently to hear her words better. Sinea's

body then shivered one last time before coming limp. Her expression grave, Fierna got up on her feet and faced Lucifer.

"SHE IS DEAD, MY LORD! SHE HOWEVER HAD TIME TO TELL ME WHO SHE WORKED FOR."

With the crowd of demons around her holding their collective breath and tensing up, Fierna then pointed an accusing finger at Lilith and Delicia.

"LILITH AND HER DAUGHTER DELICIA CONSPIRED AGAINST MY FATHER! LILITH USED NEW MAGIC CONCOCTED BY HER DAUGHTER ON THE MATERIAL PLANE TO ENTRAP THAT SERVANT AND FORCE HER TO FALSELY ACCUSE ARCHDUCHESS GLASYA IF CAUGHT."

As the demon lords present stared at once at Lilith and Delicia with either disbelief or indignation, Lucifer slowly got up from his couch and looked down coldly at Lilith, then at Delicia.

"Lady Lilith, Mistress Delicia, you will now rise on your feet."

Fierna had a mean smile as both Lilith and Delicia got up, their hearts beating faster, unsure of what would happen next. Fierna's smile however quickly disappeared when Lucifer turned to face her.

"DO YOU TAKE ME FOR A FOOL, LADY FIERNA? YOU JUST MADE TWO MISTAKES: FIRST, MISTRESS DELICIA NEVER CAME TO THE ABYSS BEFORE, WHILE LADY LILITH ONLY VISITED HER ONCE ON THE MATERIAL PLANE, WITH ME PRESENT AT THE TIME; SECOND, YOU UNDERESTIMATED HOW SENSITIVE MY SENSES ARE. I HEARD SINAE'S LAST WORDS, WHICH WERE TO WISH YOU TO BE THROWN DOWN THE SOUL SHREDDER. I ALSO FELT IT WHEN YOU INFLICTED A FATAL SPELL TO HER, KILLING HER AND SILENCING HER FOREVER."

"THAT'S NOT TRUE, MY LORD! I..."

"SILENCE! YOU WILL NOW PAY FOR YOUR DUPLICITY. GUARDS, TAKE DOWN THE BODY OF THAT SERVANT AND TIE UP IN SIMILAR FASHION LADY FIERNA TO THE POSTS."

A relieved Delicia expected Fierna's father, Lord Belial, to at least try to defend or intercede for her then. Instead, Belial kept silent and gave a glacial look at Archduchess Glasya as Fierna's clothes and armor were brutally ripped off before she was tied upside down between the posts.

"So much for paternal love." Said sarcastically Lilith on seeing that. However, Lucifer was not finished with the matter at hand, far from it, and stared hard at Glasya from across the pit.

"WOULD YOU CARE TO EXPLAIN WHY LADY FIERNA FELT OBLIGED TO TRY TO PROTECT YOU WHEN SHE FALSELY ACCUSED LADY LILITH AND MISTRESS DELICIA, ARCHDUCHESS GLASYA?"

The female demon lord, seeing her plans for more power unravel all in a sudden, then lost control of herself. Rising on her feet, she threw a spell at Lucifer, counting on the effect of surprise to defeat his magical defenses.

"I WISH DEATH TO YOU!"

To her horrified surprise, her spell, about the highest powered one known, simply bounced on an invisible barrier in front of Lucifer, who then replied in kind.

"ENERGY DRAIN!"

Squarely struck by Lucifer's spell, which broke through her own magical defenses, Glasya staggered on her feet, having just lost for many hours a significant portion of her life energy. Before she could recover from that blow, a second, then a third 'Energy Drain' spell hit her in quick succession. Her life energy level now down to barely more than that of a simple Human, Glasya collapsed to her knees, unable to use any more magic for many hours and having suffered some permanent damage to her abilities. Lucifer then shouted at the Balors on duty in the Party Hall.

"GUARDS, GRAB ARCHDUCHESS GLASYA, DENUDE HER AND TIE HER BACK TO BACK TO LADY FIERNA!"

With a small army of powerful Balors now swarming the hall, the followers of both Lady Fierna and of Archduchess Glasya wisely decided to stay put and not come to their defense, knowing what that would have brought on their own heads. Glasya, her clothes ripped away, was dragged to the punishment posts and tied back to back to Fierna. The rest of the demon lords watched on with tense expectation as Lucifer jumped down into the pit and went to Lady Fierna, touching her and draining her energy in order to prevent her from using magic to escape. He then grabbed the demonic whip used to punish the now dead servant. He however didn't use it himself on the two new prisoners, instead turning around to face Lilith and Delicia.

"Lady Lilith, Mistress Delicia, those two traitors did you wrong by trying to falsely accuse you of their own crimes. You will thus be the first to start administering their

punishment. Do not spare your strength or show pity to them. GUARDS, BRING IN TWO BRASIER AND A COLLECTION OF BRANDING IRONS!"

Understanding that she had no choice but to obey Lucifer if she wanted to avoid attracting his ire, Delicia went down in the pit with her mother. Once near the prisoners, Lilith gave her a nod of the head.

"You take care of Fierna. I will take care of Glasya."

Taking the whip offered by Lucifer, Delicia then took position a few paces in front and to the side of Fierna, suspended naked and upside down.

"YOU MAY BEGIN!" Ordered Lucifer, making Delicia start to yield her demonic whip. Despite disliking this, Delicia still understood that she would have been the one being flogged if Fierna's plan had worked. She thus struck her with all her strength, landing blow after blow across her exposed chest and making her scream repeatedly. She also lashed her belly and genitals a few times before Lord Levistus took over from her and started using red hot irons on Fierna. As for Lilith, she was replaced in front of Glasya by Lord Baalzebul, who had no love for the now fallen archduchess.

Delicia was secretly relieved when she was able to go sit down and stopped participating in the tortures. She however still had to watch, hiding her revulsion for the whole process. She didn't fool her mother, however, who whispered to her.

"I know that your Celestial side dislikes this very much, but you are wise to hide your discomfort, Delicia. Here in the Abyss, there is little to no place for pity or forgiveness, especially in the lower levels, where the worst souls are being punished for eternity."

"And what is going to happen now, Mother?"

"Those two will be tortured until they are near death, then will be fed to the Soul Shredder, to disappear forever from existence."

Delicia shivered with horror at the mention of the dreaded magical artifact normally used to eliminate those punished souls who were judged to be hopeless or useless. She knew from her early years, when she was still living in the Abyss, that chosen demon lords who had gained merit in the eyes of Lucifer were sometimes allowed to collect the raw life energy coming out of the Soul Shredder, thus gaining instantly in power and abilities. It was also said that Lucifer owed much of his tremendous power to periodic feedings at the sinister artifact.

After hours of tortures, with the demon lords watching them while having sex between them, Fierna and Glasya were judged by Lucifer to be close enough to death. The Master of the Abyss then shouted out an incantation that made part of the pit's floor open up. A big, sinister-looking thing then rose up from below, attracting a concert of fearful exclamations and comments from the demons surrounding the pit. Lucifer got up from his couch again, but looked at Lilith and Delicia before going down into the pit.

"Lady Lilith, Mistress Delicia, follow me!"

Unsure of why Lucifer needed her now, Delicia nonetheless obeyed him and went down with her mother, following Lucifer until he stopped near the two prisoners, now reduced to moaning, sobbing and bleeding bodies.

"GUARDS, TAKE THE PRISONERS DOWN AND APPROACH THEM TO THE MOUTH OF THE SOUL SHREDDER! Lilith, Delicia, come with me!"

This time, Lucifer walked to the rear of the artifact, where something that looked like a large exhaust vent was visible. There, he invited Delicia to step in front of the vent and smiled to her.

"Mistress Delicia, you served me well to date and were always loyal to me. As part of your reward, you will be able to absorb the life essence of Lady Fierna as it goes out of the Soul Shredder. As for your mother, Lady Lilith, she will be able to absorb the life essence of Archduchess Glasya."

"You are most generous, O Great Lord." Replied Delicia in a humble tone as the demons around gasped on seeing her receiving such a prized reward. Two Balors then dragged a limp Fierna close to the mouth of the Soul Shredder and, on Lucifer's signal, threw her inside its mouth. A disgusting gurgling sound accompanied by an ultimate scream from Fierna came out moments before a cloud of glowing gas burst out from the back, enveloping for a moment Delicia. She then instantly felt a tremendous surge of new vitality in her that nearly intoxicated her. Lucifer grinned to her as she slowly walked away from the vent.

"Congratulations, Mistress Delicia: you are now a much more powerful demon. May you use your new abilities to serve me faithfully."

Delicia put one knee down in front of Lucifer, bowing her head as well, before replying to him.

"And you may count on my loyalty, O Great Lord."

"Rise, my friend, and go sit back on my couch."

"Yes, My Lord!"

More than a little shaken by all this, Delicia went to Lucifer's couch and sat on it, then mentally gauged herself while watching her mother share the life essence of Glasya with Lucifer. Her senses were now even sharper than ever before, while she could feel the extra magical force that now flowed through her. When Lucifer came back to his couch with a happy Lilith, he sat next to Delicia and patted her shoulder while giving her a friendly smile.

"So, how do you feel now, my dear Delicia?"

"Powerful!" She said simply, making Lucifer grin.

"And how do you plan to use your newfound power? What do you intend to do with your life on the Material Plane?"

"I will continue my studies in Los Angeles, then will work as a photographer traveling around the World."

"A photographer? That doesn't sound very ambitious to me, Delicia. Why choose such a humble occupation?"

Delicia thought her answer over for a moment before answering the Master of the Abyss, looking up in his eyes.

"Because, as a photographer, I will be able to show to all the evil that Humans do on the Material Plane, O Great Lord."

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